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Making of a big leaguer

MAKING OF A BIG LEAGUER



BURT L. STANDISH







His mind, in full command of his body, was concentrated on
the job of solving Smoky Pete's Slants. *Frontispiece*

THE MAKING OF A BIG LEAGUER

BY

BURT L. STANDISH

Author of "Lefty o' the Bush," "Lefty o' the Big League,"
"Lefty o' the Blue Stockings," "Lefty o' the Training
Camp," "Brick King, Backstop," etc.

ILLUSTRATED BY
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THE BIG LEAGUE SERIES

By Burt L. Standish

1. LEFTY O' THE BUSH
2. LEFTY O' THE BIG LEAGUE
3. LEFTY O' THE BLUE STOCKINGS
4. LEFTY O' THE TRAINING CAMP
5. BRICK KING, BACKSTOP
6. THE MAKING OF A BIG LEAGUER
7. COURTNEY OF THE CENTER GARDEN
8. COVERING THE LOOK-IN CORNER

(Other volumes in preparation)

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The Making of a Big Leaguer

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THE MAKING OF A BIG LEAGUER

CHAPTER I

THE INTRUDER

JOHNNY McELROY saw him first. Few things got past the wide-awake manager of the Maroons, that remarkable aggregation of minors which had schooled so many stars for the big leagues. Johnny happened to be directing the regular morning batting practice, but that did not blind him to the presence of an alien in the sacred confines of the ball park. Having spotted the stranger before the fellow had advanced a dozen feet from the private entrance, a frown corrugated McElroy's heavy brows.

"And that boob at the gate has orders to keep everybody out," he growled under his breath. "I'll have something to say to him— Oh, punk —punk!" This to a recent recruit who had thrice missed the pitcher's fast ball. "What you been using in the bush, anyhow—a board! Stand up to the pan and baste the pill on the nose."

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His glance flashed back to the object of his curiosity, now approaching slowly over the turf. As Johnny took in the slim, stoop-shouldered, smartly dressed figure, the sallow, serious face, his eyes began to twinkle and his lips twitched.

“Another raw one,” he muttered, with a touch of amused anticipation.

Like all public characters, baseball managers are frequently beset by cranks whose desires vary from a yearning to rearrange the batting order of a team according to some secret system sure to secure a pennant, to the milder aspiration of shaking hands with greatness. The latter class, by the way, can usually be counted on later to electrify the loungers at the corner grocery with a casual, “As Connie Mack said to me—”

Most managers are disposed to look for cover when they see a stranger approaching, but not Johnny McElroy. No visitor ever disturbed his habitual poise. He made no effort to dodge the freaks who daily crossed his path, for in them he found much diversion. Practice had made him an adept at stringing them along, and stories of the jokes he played on some of the more persistent have been told from coast to coast. There were, to be sure, various wise critics who periodically complained that if McElroy brought to his man-

agement of the Maroons all the ingenuity and fertile invention he displayed in chaffing irresponsible fans, he could graduate from the minors at an early date. Johnny had certainly built up a team which was second to none outside the big leagues, and there could be no possible doubt that his keen sense of the ridiculous added many pages of humor to the history of the great national game.

“Say, Mac,” suddenly called a voice from the group of players waiting their turn to bat, “lamp Willie off the pickle boat, will you?”

McElroy’s only reply was a scowl followed swiftly by some vitriolic comments on Bush Hanby’s failure at bat. His face was serious now. Apparently he was absorbed in putting the Maroons through their paces. When the newcomer paused before him he even gave a slight start as of one surprised.

“Can you tell me where I can find Mr. McElroy, the manager?” inquired the stranger in precise, but entirely self-possessed, tones.

Johnny’s sharp blue eyes swept over the thin, undersized figure, and rested for an instant on the fellow’s pale face. Then he smiled pleasantly. “I sure can,” he returned heartily. “You’ve rung the bell first shot. What can I do for you?”

The man’s eyebrows arched. “Oh, really?”

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said he, putting out his hand. "I'm very glad to meet you, Mr. McElroy." He could not have been more than twenty, but he carried himself with the dignity of one who had passed the half-century mark. "I came to see if there was a chance to get on your team."

The manager's eyelids fluttered. For a second even he was staggered. But quickly he recovered himself and gripped the outstretched hand with a force which made its owner wince. "So you want to join the Maroons, do you?" he inquired. "Where have you been playing?"

"Only at college—two years ago," explained the bewildering person, without the slightest trace of hesitation or apology, "but I'm quite certain I can make good, Mr. McElroy. You see, I know the game pretty well. It might take me a week or so to get into shape, but during that time I should, of course, expect no salary."

McElroy did not start this time. Already he had sized up this strange applicant to his own satisfaction. It was plainly an attempt to put up an elaborate practical joke on him, and Johnny chuckled inwardly.

"You're some kidder, kid," he said to himself, "but you've snagged up against the wrong prop-

osition this time. Kidder happens to be my middle name."

No trace of this appeared in his manner. With an air of serious attention he listened to the stranger's explanation, nodding gravely. "I get you," he said quietly. "By the way, what did you say your name was?"

"Gifford Stone."

"Stone, eh? That's a good handle in this profession, all right." Johnny's mind was working as he talked; the situation was entirely too fraught with possibilities to be wasted. "Old Bliss Stone of the Pirates was the greatest infielder of his day. Honus Wagner never had much on him. He was before your time, of course, but when I was a kid every fan was nutty over him. Some ball player, believe me!"

Having by this reminiscent diversion gained the time needed to work out a plan, the manager continued almost without a pause:

"Well, of course, I can't say offhand without seeing you work. If you care about going out now with the boys and giving me a line on your form, I'll be able to tell better whether you'll do or not."

He quite expected a diplomatic refusal. Even the most inveterate practical joker would scarcely

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risk having the tables turned by making a fool of himself on the diamond. But this surprising individual made no effort to excuse himself. He hesitated an instant, his glance shifting to the players gathered near the plate, then back to McElroy.

"I'm not in very good condition," he said, with a touch of apology in his voice, "but I'll do the best I can. Shall I put on my suit? It's back there in my bag."

"Not necessary," answered the manager promptly. "Just slide out of your coat, and vest, and collar, and go out there at short."

"Bush!" he called out, frowning a little at the furtively watchful group of players, "toss over a glove. Mr. Stone is going to practice with us a bit. Now hit it up, boys. We've lost enough time already."

As the glove came whirling accurately into the manager's hands, one of the men chuckled, and two others promptly turned their backs. The rest maintained a fairly stolid demeanor, however, though here and there eyes twinkled and lips twitched. An intimate knowledge of Johnny McElroy's habits prepared them for what was coming, and they made ready to help the good work along.

With leisurely self-possession Gifford Stone removed his coat and laid it on the bench. The vest followed, then the collar and scarf, disclosing a silk shirt of fine texture with a monogram embroidered on the left sleeve.

“Dressed to kill,” thought Johnny, watching him interestedly “but, we won’t more than half kill him. The gink that slips one over on me’s got to do it when I’m asleep—and I’m bothered with insomnia.”

Still confident that it was a poor attempt at a practical joke, McElroy wondered what the fellow’s object could be. A dozen explanations flashed into his mind, but were rejected as unsatisfactory. “He might be a vaudeville actor trying to work me for press-agent stuff,” he thought at last; “but he’s sure taking some trouble for mighty slim returns. I’ll have his angora roped and yarded in short order.”

Under his direction the men took their places on the diamond—eight Maroons and the enigmatic stranger, the last at short. They were to play out a regulation inning or two against a picked-up team, on which Johnny had been at pains to include three of his cleverest hitters. To these, as well as to the pitcher, he gave instructions in an undertone. Then he moved over to the coaching

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line at third, determined to lose no detail of this diverting side show.

The first batter was stepping to the plate, and Johnny's face had relaxed in lines of pleased anticipation, when a sudden disagreeable suspicion smote him. What if the fellow could play ball? There was not the slightest hint of ability in his manner or appearance, but that might easily be part of a very clever disguise. He was thin and sallow, and his pose out on the diamond was distinctly awkward, but the sallowness might be less than skin deep, and awkwardness is easily feigned. Suppose some one who had suffered from Johnny McElroy's abnormal sense of humor was taking this means of turning the laugh! It wasn't much of a trick to get hold of a clever player whose face was unknown to Johnny and make him up to fit the part.

The possibility wiped every trace of amusement from McElroy's face, as a wet sponge obliterates chalk marks. What if it was Clawson, of the Tigers, who had put up the job! The tale would spread from end to end of the league. Fervently McElroy wished he had "bawled out" the fellow at the very start, instead of kidding him along. But it was too late now. Moose Conroy was al-

ready beginning his elaborate wind-up. The manager's shoulders moved uneasily, and a wrinkle puckered his forehead as he waited.

CHAPTER II

JOHNNY MC ELROY, JOKER

DESPITE those skeptics who claim that such a thing cannot be done by any batter, "Red" Ferguson, the Maroons' left fielder, was credited by a large and enthusiastic following with an ability at placing his hits. McElroy habitually frowned on such fulsome praise as likely to produce a swelled head and unpleasant altercations on the subject of a raise in salary when the new contracts were sent out; but in the light of what followed he admitted—to himself—that for once Red's aim was as accurate as that of a rifle marksman.

Swinging to meet Conroy's first ball, Ferguson sent the sphere humming straight toward short. It was low and swift, and the amateur shortstop could not have avoided it without stepping deliberately aside. McElroy saw him fling up both hands, heard a stinging smack, and, with a grim returning smile, beheld the diverting spectacle of the elusive horsehide bounding over the turf, clumsily pursued by that incongruous figure in

razor-edged trousers and silk shirt. Long before the ball was finally overtaken the runner was grinning derisively on first, while furtive smiles wreathed the faces of the other infielders.

Johnny drew a long breath; his face cleared. It began to look as if his uneasiness was unwarranted. The stranger might be faking in order to make his final triumph the more surprising, but the manager doubted it. In his varied career McElroy had come in contact with every sort of ball player, and he had a strong suspicion that this one was keeping nothing up his sleeve. This suspicion deepened to certainty. The second man up, fed a pitched ball that was easy to place, slammed a hot grounder across the diamond, which Stone fumbled, then threw wide, pulling the baseman off his sack.

McElroy chuckled. "Theory and practice are some different," he muttered to himself.

By what seemed a miracle of chance this extraordinary ball player stopped the next hit and managed to hold the ball.

"Here—put it here!" came in a sudden barking chorus from three corners of the diamond.

Evidently confused by the shrill calls from different directions, Stone hesitated. When he finally threw the ball to third, the bases were full.

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By this time the last tinge of doubt had vanished from McElroy's mind, and he was thoroughly enjoying himself.

"And you thought you could put it over Johnny Mack," he growled grimly. "You'll have to try again, son—several times."

Because of the uneasiness this "fresh guy" had made him feel, the manager found a decided satisfaction in his humiliation; for humiliation it was. Every man who came up—and they followed one another without a second's delay—did his best to slam the ball straight at that stumbling, wavering, awkward figure at short. If by chance he got it, the infielders set up a disconcerting roar calculated to confuse even a seasoned veteran. They kept him running, catching, throwing without let-up. In five minutes he was gasping for breath and streaming perspiration from every pore. In ten he had broken every law of the baseball code, save one: he had not quit. Despite his dazed confusion and stumbling uncertainty, he made no effort to dodge the balls that came humming, whistling, streaking, or hopping in his direction with every crack of the bat. He might miss them, and did four times out of five, but it was through no lack of trying. And as Johnny McElroy watched the painful efforts of this incomprehensible youth

his amused grin wore thin, then vanished. The element of humor seemed suddenly to have departed from the exhibition.

“By George!” he muttered. “He’s a game little rooster, anyhow. I reckon he’s had his lesson. All right!” he shouted; “that’ll do.”

With visible reluctance the Maroons ceased their horseplay and jogged in from the field.

“What did you stop so soon for, Mac?” said Conroy, pausing for an instant beside the manager. “We’ve got that tailor’s dummy with his tongue hanging out a foot. He’d stepped on it and tripped himself up in two minutes more.”

“Think I want to fool away the whole morning?” retorted McElroy with some tartness. “Go ahead with that batting, now. And look here, Bush,” he called to the raw recruit, “I’m wondering if you could hit a bushel basket if any one pitched it over the center of the pan. You’ve got to show me.”

When he glanced back again, Stone was walking slowly toward him across the diamond, looking utterly done up. His shoulders sagged, his breath came and went unevenly, the silk shirt clung soggily to his slim body, making it seem thinner and more undeveloped than ever. Then, seeing McElroy’s eyes fixed on him, he straight-

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ened with an effort, and busied himself mopping his face in an obvious attempt to conceal his exhaustion from the older man, which made the latter oddly uncomfortable. And just because he was uncomfortable without exactly knowing why, the manager's manner became gruff almost to harshness.

"Well, it didn't work, did it?" he said brusquely, with a squaring of his rather prominent jaw.

The young man crumpled the handkerchief in one hand and stared. "Work?" he repeated, with a rising inflection. "Oh, you mean that I didn't show up very well."

"Can that!" ordered McElroy succinctly. "You know what I'm talking about. You didn't put one over on me, as you expected." His manner thawed suddenly. After all, he could afford to be generous. "What's the idea, anyhow? Where was the joke in it?"

A touch of color came into Stone's face, and he drew himself up stiffly. "Joke!" he echoed. "There wasn't any joke, except that I was fool enough to think I could field without having touched a baseball in two years."

For a moment the manager gazed in silent incredulity at this surprising individual. It was

next to impossible to believe the fellow actually in earnest in his expectation of making good with an organization like the Maroons, yet the longer McElroy stared, the less he doubted. At first sight the man's face had seemed insignificant, but it was not so in reality. The features were delicate, to be sure, but clean cut; and just now there was a tense, dogged expression about the mouth and chin which bespoke anything but weakness. The eyes were level and straightforward, with no hint of deception in their serious depths.

"You really meant—" began McElroy dazedly.

"I did," was the crisp response. "I still do. I'm going to play professional baseball. That wasn't a fair test just now. If I'd been in practice and condition I'd never have made such an exhibition of myself."

The manager quickly recovered his self-possession. He had made one mistake in sizing up this rare bird, but there wasn't a chance of his going wrong again. The fellow was hipped, of course. Nevertheless, Johnny couldn't help feeling an odd interest in him as impossible to explain as it was to understand.

"Well," he drawled, his eyes twinkling with tolerant good humor, "let me tell you something, son. Condition's a mighty fine thing. No athlete can

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get on without a body tuned up to G. But to hand out the brand of baseball that goes in this league, you'll need a whole lot more than muscle and wind. I don't know what your idea is, but if you're dead set on the profession the only thing for you is to start in the bushes, the way most every raw one has to. There ain't no short and easy road to success in baseball, and you've got a few things to learn. You don't savvy? Well, just for fun I'll show you something."

A sharp command sent the men loping out upon the field again, Slats Ramsey, wiry, sandy-haired, and self-possessed, taking his regular position at short. Another order started the batters working, and, as before, each man, with careful deliberation and aided by the pitcher, did his best to smash the ball out between second and third. The conditions which had governed the farcical test of Gifford Stone were practically duplicated, but the result was as different as day from night. There was no fumbling, no wild throwing, no errors in judgment. With a snap and swiftness which showed mind and body perfectly attuned, Ramsey scooped grounders from his shoes, made amazing one-hand stops, plucked the ball from the air above his head. Without losing a fraction of a second,

he lined it accurately to the proper base in a manner that seemed the perfection of graceful ease.

Not a detail of this performance escaped the man at McElroy's elbow. He made no comment, however, and his face was absolutely expressionless. The exhibition seemed not to produce the slightest impression on him, and Johnny began to get irritated at what seemed the densest sort of stupidity.

"Well!" he said sharply, when it became evident that no remarks were forthcoming from Stone. "Come to life! Slip us a comment if you've got one to spare."

The other man shrugged his shoulders lightly. "Very nice," he said, almost indifferently. "Can he hit?"

The momentary interest McElroy had felt in this incomprehensible individual vanished before a rush of indignation. After going out of his way to give the fellow an object lesson, the utter indifference with which it had been received was extremely aggravating. "Hit!" snapped the manager tartly. "So that's your long suit, is it? I was wondering just where you shone at the game." His voice was crisp with sarcasm. "Suppose you step up there and give us a lesson in the art."

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A touch of color came into the thin face, but without hesitation Stone moved over to the pile of bats, carefully selected a stick, and walked to the plate.

CHAPTER III

THE PUZZLE

ASUDDEN ripple of pleased anticipation passed over the Maroons, and the infielders stiffened to attention as they perceived the unexpected opportunity of further diverting themselves with the serious-minded greenhorn. At short, Slats Ramsey snickered audibly, and Moose Conroy, suppressing a grin, turned to glare reprovingly at him before beginning an elaborate wind-up calculated to strike awe to the heart of the unsophisticated. Moose's control was proverbial, and his teammates were not surprised to see the ball shoot from his fingers with tremendous velocity, taking a course, apparently, which would land it squarely against the foolish batter's ribs. Into several minds flashed joyful pictures of Stone leaping awkwardly back to escape the dangerous missile, even falling in his haste. Those mental visions vanished in a twinkling.

He stepped back, it is true, but very little. At the same instant the bat came snapping round and

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met the curving horsehide with a clean crack that sent it humming far into the outfield.

The amazement mirrored on the faces of ball players and manager was amusing. But while two outfielders pursued the bounding sphere, the rest of the team gave themselves over to accelerating the progress of Stone along the paths. To the accompaniment of a shrill, encouraging chorus, he rounded first and tore down the base line. Crossing second, he was urged forward by wildly waving arms and piercing admonitions. He was at least thirty feet from third when a warning yell arose from the grinning coaches:

“Slide!”

“Slide! slide!” was echoed in a roar from all parts of the diamond.

Without hesitation the man obeyed. Flinging himself clumsily forward on his stomach, he vanished in a cloud of dust.

As the ball landed in Tex Kreeger’s waiting mitt, a hand came into view at least three feet from the sack, the fingers wriggling frantically, but quite hopelessly in a straining effort to touch the bag. Then a puff of wind swept away the dust, revealing to the delighted onlookers the aspiring amateur—a slim length of brownish gray—wallowing quite stationary, every ounce of momentum

used up, coughing and sneezing in the choking reek he had raised.

Amidst much laughter Kreeger stepped forward with mock gravity and touched the man with the ball before helping him to his feet. There was small likeness in this begrimed and tattered figure to the resplendent vision that had burst upon the Maroons a scant half hour before. The silk shirt had turned a dingy drab, and was badly torn in several places. The immaculate trousers had likewise proved unequal to the strain.

The laughter of the players deepened to a roar as Stone moved slowly away from the sack, mechanically beating the dust from his clothing. His face had turned a dull red, but his expression was grim, without the trace of a mitigating sense of humor.

“Try again,” invited McElroy, suppressing with difficulty the mirth that stirred him. “You might try the fall-away slide for a change. Throw yourself away from the base, you know, and hook the hassock with your pet corn. Show us some real class.”

Without a word, with that same grim, tight-lipped expression, Stone stepped to the plate again. Broad grins were visible on every face. Inwardly convulsed at the thought of the spectacle

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that would greet them if this fellow essayed the fall-away slide, Conroy managed to control himself and stepped into the box.

"I won't use a curve," he thought, as he balanced on one pin. "If he don't hit at all there won't be any fun. I'll try a few in the groove, and mebbe he'll manage to connect with one of 'em."

He could not resist a yearning to dazzle the man who, as he believed, had hit the first one by sheer luck, and the ball smoked as it left his fingers, aimed to cut the heart of the pan. With that same quiet precision and seeming lack of effort, Stone brought his bat round at exactly the right moment to meet the whistling sphere fair and square with a frightful smash that was heard to the farthest limits of the field.

"Murder!" gasped McElroy, his jaw sagging.
"What a wallop!"

Straight out between left and center soared the ball, the pursuing fielders tearing up the turf in a desperate effort to get under it. The attempt was quite futile, as the manager realized at once. His eyes mechanically followed the flying speck of white. Presently it began to drop, disappearing for a moment as it crossed in front of a big white "sky sign" on a building outside the grounds, then

flashing into view again against a darker background. At last it vanished.

His face twisted oddly, Johnny turned to observe the runner jogging calmly along between second and third with the irritating air of one having time to burn.

The sight annoyed the joke-loving manager inexpressibly. "The little runt!" he muttered under his breath. "To think of his knocking out a home run! Of course it was an accident, but—gee whiz!"

His face was still puckered as Stone strolled across the plate and turned toward him.

"I thought your pitchers had some class," the stranger drawled, taking no pains to lower his voice. "That one is easy. Give me a week or two to get into shape, and I can do as well myself."

Johnny gasped at the unexpectedness of it, then his face hardened. Out on the mound Moose Conroy nearly blew up at this gratuitous insult.

"You're the real Lajoie, you are!" sneered McElroy. "Did you think for a minute he was trying to keep you from hitting? He did his best to let you—"

"Hi, there, Mac!" interrupted the frothing pitcher, unable longer to contain himself. "Send

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that freak to the plate again and let's see if he can get a hit off me."

Without waiting for the manager's permission, Stone picked up a bat and took his place at the rubber for the third time, his bored air bringing Conroy's teeth together with a click.

The humor of the situation had quite oozed away as far as Moose was concerned. "I'd like to bean you, you rube!" he muttered under his breath, preparing to bend over an elusive curve. "And I'd do it if I wasn't afraid of killing you."

Then he put all he had on the ball. Stone fouled it. He fouled the next one, too, in spite of Conroy's effort to keep him from touching it.

The pitcher's anger increased; likewise his determination to fan this fresh newcomer who didn't seem to have enough sense to distinguish between good pitching and bad. Taking plenty of time, he tried a puzzling outdrop which had more than once proved the undoing of seasoned batters. Still Stone hit it, and away it sailed back of third base, foul by a foot.

Some of the fielders were still chuckling over the amusing figure cut by the streaked, grimy, tattered man at the plate; but about this time several of them began to count. Three, four, five, came the fouls with the monotonous regularity of

machinery. Six, seven! Stone could not seem to hit them fairly, but at least he effectually spoiled the good ones. Eight, nine—was he never going to miss?

Dominated by cold, determined fury, Conroy pitched his prettiest, trying every trick in his repertoire. Ten! The grins had vanished from every face, and a vague feeling of suspense became evident. Eleven! Moose caught the ball and lifted it, hidden by both hands, to his mouth. His head went back. It was to be the “spitter,” which Stone had fouled once out of those eleven swings of the bat. Whizzing from Conroy’s fingers, the sphere seemed actually to curve around the bat that swung to meet it. There was a concerted yell, triumphant and tinged a little with relief:

“You fanned him, Moose!”

Stone paid not the slightest heed to any of the rough jokes hurled in his direction. Gathering up his belongings from the bench, he turned to McElroy. “Thanks for the try-out,” he said coolly. “I gather that I haven’t shown quite enough class for your crowd.”

“Oh, dear, yes,” chuckled the manager, “you’re too good—that’s the trouble. I couldn’t afford to pay you the salary you’re really worth, you

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know. As long as you're so fast and so dippy about the game, you'd better apply to McGraw. He needs you for the Giants."

For the first time the stranger's composure seemed momentarily to leave him. He shot McElroy an almost savage look. "Dippy about it!" he flung back. "What gave you that idea? I'm not, and never was. I hate the game!"

Stunned, speechless, Johnny McElroy stared in chagrined amazement at the disreputable figure moving toward the clubhouse, apparently oblivious to the jocular comments hurled after it by the Maroons.

"Crazy as a coot!" snapped the disgusted manager, " and I, like a fool, let him string me!"

CHAPTER IV

WITHOUT RESOURCES

WITH great deliberation Gifford Stone crossed the field and entered the club-house. Paying not the least attention to Toots, the negro rubber and general handy man, who hovered about, torn between curiosity and a vast natural dignity, he carried his suit case into the dressing room and deposited it on the bench. Stripping quickly, he stepped under a shower. Ten minutes later, dressed carefully in fresh linen and the extra suit he had brought, he departed by the private entrance.

Out at the car tracks he paused and set down the suit case. For the first time his lips relaxed in a grim smile. He had caught a glimpse of himself in a mirror in the clubhouse, and it was not difficult to understand the raucous mirth of the Maroons. But soon his smile gave place to a thoughtful frown which had in it a touch of indecision. He had not the least intention of giving up; it was simply the immediate question of what step to take next that troubled him. His ignorance of professional baseball had betrayed him into under-

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estimating the capabilities of the minors. He had vaguely supposed them to be about on a par with the average college team—perhaps even below it. He had thought that it might take him a couple of weeks to condition himself and get back into the swing of the game, but there had not been a doubt in his mind of swiftly equaling, if not surpassing, the average minor leaguer.

The clean-cut performance of the regular Maroon shortstop had opened his eyes with rude abruptness. Whatever McElroy might think, Stone was no fool; and, though he had purposely refrained from admitting it to the manager, the aspiring ball player realized how far his own amateurish performance had fallen below the standard of the Atlantic Coast League.

As he stood thinking of this, there came that curious hardening of the jaw and chin, bringing again to the rather delicate face the incongruous expression of dogged determination which had caused Johnny McElroy to wonder. Some day—not in the dim, distant future, but relatively close at hand—he would not only equal that standard, but surpass it. There was no question of it in his mind. With full faith in his ability to succeed provided he brought to the effort sufficient determination and brain power, he calmly stated this to

himself as an assured fact. He had started wrong, that was all—started hastily, without due thought and planning, knowing almost nothing of actual conditions. To reach the goal he had set for himself he must begin again on a lower level and work his way up.

Fortunately he would have to spend little time on the batting proposition. His extraordinary ability to hit almost any kind of a ball without effort had caused his classmates to badger him into trying, much against his will, for the freshman nine two years before. It was this gift, too—though he had never regarded it as a gift—which had kept him on the nine and led him to waste an endless amount of time at something he detested as drudgery. Not having to consider the batting feature of a baseball education, he would have much more time to devote to perfecting his fielding.

The motorman of an approaching trolley, seeing the man standing motionless beside the track, brought his car to a stop and Stone stepped aboard. He had decided that the railroad station would be as good a starting point as any.

McElroy's advice about beginning on a bush team had doubtless been sincere, but Stone had always thought of the average bush team as made up of immature boys, who played mainly on the back lots

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or at country fairs. The idea of going into such company, even for a short time, was not alluring; yet at the moment there seemed no alternative.

To locate a bush team in a strange country is not easy, but now Gifford happened to be favored by chance. The conductor proved to be an ardent fan who had not been long enough away from the land of bush ball to lose his enthusiasm for the game as played there. He stated that the Lakeville Reds were the warmest little bunch of scrapers to be found in the country. Johnny Mack's Maroons might surpass them in point of strength, but it was evident that the Reds still retained first place in the fare collector's estimation.

"If you want to see a nice little old game, Jack, that'll keep you yelling from the first ball pitched," he advised, "it would pay you to run out to Lakeville. 'Twon't take long—about an hour. They're up against the Warren Sluggers to-day.'" He sighed. "It'll be a hot go. If I could get off I'd be there myself."

Gifford suppressed a smile at the extravagance of this eulogy. He was not surprised to learn that his informant had been born and raised in Lakeville. Furthermore, during the preceding summer he had played left field for the famous Reds. Nevertheless, a moment's consideration led Stone

to decide that he would follow the ex-busher's advice. He was confident that this partisan's estimation of the team might be discounted fifty per cent or more, and therefore it was possible that in Lakeville he might find an opening to break into the game as a player.

The conductor advised taking the twelve forty-six train instead of one leaving over two hours later, and even went forward to urge the motor-man to "hit it up a bit." But there was a block, caused by an overladen truck, and they reached the station with not more than half a minute to spare.

Dashing through the depot without waiting to buy a ticket, Gifford found the train shed thronged with a motley crowd of excursionists. Paying no heed to the angry comments brought forth by his rush through the mob, he shoved forward, his eyes fixed on the sign which was even then being removed. Almost at the gate he was brought to a momentary stop by a group of young fellows wearing garish caps of a uniform check, and carrying slender canes with banners attached. He managed to tear himself loose, however, ignoring the insulting language hurled after him. Sprinting down the platform, he swung aboard the last car of the moving train.

"Whew!" he breathed, dropping into a seat and

mopping his forehead. "A little too hot for that sort of thing."

Still, he was glad he had made it. By waiting for the later train he would have missed the first inning, at least, and he wanted to be there at the very start of the game to see what sort of players these Reds were before approaching their manager. He was planning the interview when the approach of the conductor brought his mind back to the present and led him to thrust one hand carelessly into the inside pocket of his coat.

The next instant his heart gave a leap, driving the blood from his face. In another moment he was in action again; the searching fingers, thrust deeper, encountered nothing. With fumbling haste he went through the other pockets, knowing all the time that it was useless. His pocketbook was invariably carried in that inside coat pocket. He remembered placing it there when he changed his clothes in the Maroons' dressing room. It was gone, and with it had vanished every cent he possessed, save a few loose coins.

For a second he thought of the loquacious trolley conductor, but swiftly put aside the suspicion. The man had had no chance. Then he remembered the motley crowd thronging the station and the gang of young roughs through which he had

pushed his way. Two of them had pressed so close that it became necessary to thrust them aside by force. Gifford had imagined it mere harmless horseplay; he knew better now.

He half rose to his feet, only to sink back again, his face flushing as he caught the keen eyes of the conductor fixed upon him.

“Ticket, please.”

“I haven’t any,” explained Stone briefly, the flush deepening.

The official drew out ticket pad and punch. “Where to?” he asked perfunctorily.

“I’m sorry,” said Stone, quietly, “but I haven’t any money, either.” His composure was returning swiftly. “I had to run for the train through a crowd in the station. When I came to look for my wallet just now, I found it gone.”

The conductor eyed him suspiciously. “You’ll have to get off at the next station, you know.”

“Couldn’t you let me ride as far as Lakeville?” urged Stone. “I’m a stranger around—”

“No, sir!” interrupted the official emphatically. “The rules say pay or get off, and I can’t make any exceptions. Sure that wallet was stolen and not just mislaid?” he insinuated.

Stone ignored this. “What is the next station?” he asked.

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“Wilton,” was the snappy reply. “We’re due there in five minutes. I’d advise you not to get absent-minded and forget to step off when the train stops.”

An angry glint in his eyes, Gifford stared after the conductor, wishing vaguely that he could give the man a lesson. He was merely doing his duty, of course, but a less offensive manner would have accomplished the result equally well.

Presently the signal cord was jerked in a sharp manner. Stone’s face fell. A flag station! He hadn’t counted on that.

The conductor slipped back into the car as the train slowed down. “Wilton,” he called, his eyes transfixing the luckless passenger.

Gifford rose, outwardly cool and composed, strolled leisurely down the aisle, and descended the steps without a glance at the watching official. The sight of the small, weather-beaten station, with its peeling paint and dingy windows, a single bucolic lounger ornamenting a wooden bench on the platform, failed to disturb his equanimity—at least until the train had pulled out. He was up against it, and he had already decided to take his medicine without letting any one hear him whimper.

CHAPTER V.

THE HIRED MAN

“TIMES ain’t what they was, mother,” remarked Eliphilet Pettigill in a dis-couraged tone. “It wasn’t so far back that you could leave word down to the store when you wanted a man, an’ count on havin’ half a dozen to pick from next mornin’. Now you can’t scrape up even a boy, with a fine-tooth comb. The minute they git to be a mite of use they leave an’ go larrupin’ off to the city. It’s been a hull week sence that Shrubb boy up an’ quit without a day’s notice, and I ain’t been able to git holt of nobody.”

“A week to-morrow,” corrected Mrs. Pettigill, carrying an armful of dishes to the sink. “Good riddance, I’d say. He was that lazy he’d take root if you didn’t keep after him the whole time.”

Farmer Pettigill scratched his head. “Mebbe so,” he said, “but he was better than nothin’. I’m clean wore out tryin’ to do the work of three men, an’ not makin’ any headway at that. Dunno’s I’ll ever git the hay down—”

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He paused abruptly, and peered out of the open doorway. There was an unmistakable sound of footsteps on the graveled path leading around from the road, and Mr. Pettigill's curiosity had scarcely been aroused before it was gratified.

A young man, slim and not very tall, appeared, suit case in hand. The studied care of his attire—quite foreign to Wilton and that vicinity—no less than the presence of the bag, brought to Eliphilet's mind unpleasant visions of book agents, drummers, and other members of that persistent tribe, and the farmer's beetling brows straightened ominously.

"Good evening," said the stranger, politely, setting down the bag. "Are you Mr. Pettigill?"

"I be," was the sharp retort, "but I ain't buyin' no mining stock nor art albums to-day."

The stranger smiled. "I haven't any to sell. I heard down at the store that you wanted to hire a man."

Mr. Pettigill's jaw sagged; amazement puckered the long, narrow face.

"You ain't lookin' for work yourself, be you?" he asked incredulously.

The man nodded. "I am," he answered, "and it's quite necessary for me to find it."

"Humph!" grunted Mr. Pettigill. His mouth

closed with a snap; suspicion lurked in every line of the weather-beaten countenance. "Jedgin' by your 'pearance, either you ain't done much huntin' or your eyesight's bad. You'd be about as much use on a farm as a blacksmith in a watch fact'ry."

"Father!" came sharply through the open window.

Obediently Mr. Pettigill entered the kitchen at the call of his better half.

"Be you crazy?" demanded the good woman tartly. "Here you been after a man for a week, groanin' and complainin' about the work not bein' done, and you turn away the first one that comes."

"But he ain't no farm 'hand," protested Eliphalet. "You can tell that from his clothes an' the hull look of him. Mebbe he's one of them city sharks."

"Mebbe he ain't!" retorted Mrs. Pettigill. "Like's not he's one of them college boys lookin' to make some money in vacation time. Hiram Peters had three of 'em getting in his hay last summer. You go strait out there and talk to him right. If he answers your questions honest, hire him. He couldn't be no worse than Jed Shrubb, and if he don't suit, you can let him go."

Chastened and likewise made hopeful by this suggestion, Mr. Pettigill returned to the waiting

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stranger. Cross-examination proved the correctness of the woman's guess; the young man attended college, was broke, and anxious to earn a little money. He confessed to a total ignorance of farm work, but was ready to do his best to learn. His name was Gifford Stone.

Gifford was hired for a dollar a day and board. Mrs. Pettigill gave him some supper, then he was informed that the breakfast hour was five o'clock, and shown up to a little room under the peak of the roof. Before retiring, Mrs. Pettigill hunted up an old pair of overalls for the new hired man. It seemed a pity to spoil those good clothes, she thought. Besides, she rather liked his face and pleasant manners.

Next morning the newcomer was down before the hour, and at a quarter past he sallied forth with Mr. Pettigill. They returned at noon, the hired man flushed, somewhat wilted, but uncomplaining.

"He's that ignorant you'd hardly believe it," confided the farmer to his wife. "Dunno how to handle a pitchfork nor a hand rake even, but he's learnin'. Ain't awful strong, neither, though I will say he seems willin' enough and don't shirk."

"He looks tired," commented the good woman,

glancing through the shed door to where the hired man was washing in a tin basin.

"He'll be more so before he's less," returned Eliphilet grimly.

He was. To Gifford those first few days seemed endless. He worked till he felt it would be a physical impossibility to lift a finger, then had recourse to sheer nerve alone. The sun burned him to a flaming scarlet; his palms seemed one huge blister; the sweet odor of new-mown hay sickened him. Each night he dragged himself into the farmhouse aching in every limb and so tired that supper lost its savor and bed seemed the only desirable thing in the world. He was like a log from the moment his head touched the pillow; then, when it seemed that he had slept barely a minute, would come his employer's stentorian bellow and that wrenching awakening to another day.

But he was too stubborn to shirk, too proud to complain. He had agreed to do certain things—the number of them seemed unending, but that was the fault of the job rather than Farmer Pettigill—and he meant to carry out the contract. He brought to the task of being hired man in haying time all the stubborn, dogged persistence he gave to everything he undertook. Presently he had his reward.

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Little by little—so slowly at first that he scarcely realized it—his intense weariness began to lessen. His muscles strengthened, his wind improved. He began to take an interest in his work, which grew less and less like drudgery. He learned to “tread a load” so that it would stay when piled high on the hayrack, and he was able to handle it and stow it skillfully back under the eaves of the barn when the horse fork tossed it up to him in huge, tumbling masses. His appetite increased, and, though he still slept soundly, his sleep was not the dull unconsciousness of utter exhaustion. He no longer rolled into bed the moment supper was over, but took to sitting up with the farmer and his wife or strolling restlessly about in the long, quiet twilights.

Then one night he slipped away the minute the evening meal was over and did not return till long after dark. For several nights the same thing happened before Mrs. Pettigill observed that on his return the well-worn overalls were smeared with clay. Instantly her curiosity was aroused. The clay was thickly caked, as if the hired man had fairly swallowed in it.

Eliphalet was promptly informed of the discovery, and on the following evening, when the new hand had made his unostentatious departure, the

farmer followed at a discreet distance. In ten minutes he returned to his better half, his jaw sagging and his eyes fairly bulging from their sockets.

“The boy’s loony, mother!” he gasped.
“Crazy as a March hare!”

“Crazy!” repeated Mrs. Pettigill sharply.
“What makes you say that? What’s he doing?”

Eliphalet shook his head dazedly. “I ain’t no more idea than nothin’,” he returned. “He’s jest actin’ foolish. Come an’ see.”

Together they circled the woodshed, crossed the yard, and hurried past the chicken houses. At the corner of the big hay barn, the farmer stopped abruptly, peered cautiously around, and beckoned his wife to do likewise.

CHAPTER VI

A NIGHT OF TERROR

THE spot faced the western hills, and in the light of the crimson afterglow Mrs. Pettigill had no difficulty in observing the strange behavior of the hired man. When she first saw him he stood beside a flat, rough rock holding a wagon spoke tightly in both hands. His eyes looked with curious intentness straight out across the empty field, and the good woman had scarcely suppressed the shiver caused by this uncanny stare when he brought the spoke around with swishing force, as if striking with all his strength at some invisible object. Then he flung the spoke from him and, half turning, started running at top speed.

“My land!” gasped Mrs. Pettigill in a tone of perplexed horror.

“Wait,” advised Eliphilet in a gloomy undertone. “Look at him try to plow a furrer with his ear.”

The words were scarcely out of his mouth be-



Then he flung the spake from him and, half turning, started running at top speed.

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fore the hired man flung himself recklessly at another rock, about which the clay had been pounded flat and hard. The impetus of that forward rush was so great that Mrs. Pettigill, fully expecting to see his brains dashed out before her very eyes, clapped one hand over her mouth to suppress the cry which trembled on her lips.

Her anxiety was quite needless. How he did it she could not see, but the next instant she beheld him stretched on his side, his body beyond the stone, and one foot thrust out barely touching it. Then, like something made of rubber, he leaped up, jogged back to the first rock, and picked up the wagon spoke.

Clinging with trembling hands to her husband, Mrs. Pettigill once more intently followed each movement of that incomprehensible performance before she dragged Eliphilet away. She was not an imaginative woman, but there was something vaguely horrible about it all, particularly in that queer, fixed stare and the desperate beating of the air with the wagon spoke. It was as if he were vainly trying to kill some dreadful phantom of his mind and, failing, sought to escape it in flight. That deliberate rolling in the dirt and the comparatively calm return to the scene of his hallucination she did not attempt to explain.

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Back in the kitchen the two discussed the affair in tense whispers.

"Mother," said the disturbed farmer, "we've been harborin' an escaped lunatic!"

The agitated woman wrung her hands. "Mebbe he ain't really dangerous," she returned. "He's so soft spoken and polite! I can't believe he'd really hurt anybody."

"Mebbe not, but if he ever should land on anybody's ribs when he swings that wagon spoke, the one he hit would lay quiet till Gabriel blew his trumpet. I'd as soon be struck by lightnin'!"

"What made you ever hire him?"

Mr. Pettigill gave her a look of reproach. "If I ain't losin' my mem'ry," he answered, "you was responsible for that. I thought mebbe he was a book agent or a bunko man or somethin' of the sort, because he was all jerried up in fine clothes, but you said to grab him and we could fire him any time we wanted to. Well, we've got him, but I own up I'm afraid to fire him; he might git mad and try to play tag with me with a wagon spoke or something."

In this gloomy manner they continued to discuss the situation until the object of their fears returned, whistling softly and tunefully. He did not appear to notice their constrained manner.

His face was somewhat flushed and his eyes bright. There was a note in his voice of enthusiasm or satisfaction, as if something that had happened pleased him immensely.

The effect, on Mr. Pettigill, at least, was far from soothing. He watched the young man, hawklike, until Stone finally lighted his hand lamp, bade them a pleasant good night, and departed to bed.

"He don't act crazy now," thoughtfully commented Mrs. Pettigill, rattling the neglected supper dishes.

"The spell's over for a while," said Eliphilet. "Likely he thinks he's got the best of whatever he was a-swattin' at."

The dishes washed, they sat close together for nearly an hour discussing what course they should pursue regarding the unwelcome helper. Both agreed that it would be best to try to get rid of him by some sort of subterfuge not calculated to arouse him to any unusual pitch of excitement; but no definite plan had been decided upon when, both being very sleepy, they concluded that a night's rest might bring forth an acceptable plan of action.

Their bedroom was in a wing of the house, and as they were passing the narrow, boxed-in stairs

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leading to the attic floor, the muffled but unmistakable sound of a voice from above brought both to an instant halt. It ceased almost at once, and in the silence that followed, Mrs. Pettigill, clinging to her husband, who was holding the flaring hand lamp above his head, whispered nervously:

“He’s left his door open. Do you s’pose he’s havin’ another spell? Sounded like he might be rantin’ an’ ravin’ in his sleep. What’d he say?”

“I didn’t just ketch—

Then: “Catch it—catch it, you dub!” Clear and distinct the words came down the stairs, causing Eliphilet to jump and dodge as if expecting some sort of a missile to follow them. Mrs. Pettigill immediately showed signs of fainting. Together, having backed out of range at one side of the stairway, they stood with ears cocked toward the attic, listening.

“S’pose he meant me, mother!” the shivering man whispered presently. “I was just sayin’ I didn’t ketch what he said before that, when he—”

“Steal! Steal!” Again the voice of the hired man set their nerves jangling, and the lamp in Mr. Pettigill’s hands shook until it was remarkable that the chimney did not topple off.

“He’s talkin’ in his sleep, father,” gasped the

farmer's wife. "He's dreamin' and talkin' out loud. That's when folks give themselves away for jest what they really be."

"Then he's a crim'nal! Didn't you hear him holler out—"

"Safe! Robber! Thief! Safe, safe!"

"There," panted the terrified woman at the foot of the stairs, "now we know what he is! He's a thief—a safe robber! Him so young and soft spoken! It's a turrible thing!"

"Mebbe he's wuss," suggested Eliphilet dolefully. "If he ain't loony, he was practicin' some sort of a shindig out behind the barn that no man would go through short of committin' actual murder."

"Stop!" she admonished. "Don't you ske-daddle. He won't hurt nobody now. You ain't fool enough to think anybody'd give themselves away like that if they knew what they was sayin', be you!"

Mr. Pettigill put the lamp down on a small table. He peered over his wife's shoulder at the dark stairway leading to the attic as if expecting to behold some fearful apparition descending therefrom.

"Mother," he quavered faintly, "we're in desprit peril. He may be talkin' in his sleep, but

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I thought sartain he was goin' to chuck suthin' at me once. I'm all a-shiver."

"Do stiffen up and git a little backbone," she returned. "You're my natteral protector. You can't fail me now. I'm that exasperated I dunno what to do with you."

"Kill him!" croaked the voice from above with terrible emphasis. "Kill the old umpire!"

By holding fast to the man of the house Mrs. Pettigill prevented him from taking flight. "Stiddy," she begged, her own teeth chattering. "If you wake him up now we're goners. He's got murder in his mind. Git your gun, father—git your gun and load it. Step soft. I'll carry the lamp."

Scarcely breathing, they tiptoed back to the kitchen, and Eliphilet hurriedly dug a muzzle-loading shotgun, vintage of the early sixties, out of a closet. After much pawing, while his wife held the light, he brought forth powder horn, shot pouch, and a box of percussion caps.

"I ain't fired her sence I shot that thievin' old fox five year ago," he said somewhat doubtfully, "and she nigh broke my shoulder then. It was lame for a solid month so I couldn't lift a knife-load of food to my mouth, and I've had the rheumatiz in it ever sence by spells."

“What’s a lame shoulder when our lives is in danger!” reprovingly returned Mrs. Pettigill. “Load up, father.”

Thus admonished, the farmer poured forth a handful of powder, holding the stopper of the horn in his teeth. The powder was turned carefully into the muzzle of the gun, and a mass of wadding, torn from a newspaper, was rammed down on top of it. Then followed a handful of buckshot, heaped up at the suggestion of the alarmed woman, and another newspaper wad was packed down upon it with the iron ramrod.

“Mercy on me, if I have to shoot off this charge!” groaned the old man between grunts brought forth by his exertion in driving the ramrod home.

“Do quit that sort of talk. You’ve got your duty to do, and you can’t squawk in the face of it. Show your backbone if you’ve got any.”

Together they tiptoed back on the way to their bedroom, Mr. Pettigill gripping the gun, which he dreaded scarcely less than the desperado in the attic, his wife bearing the lamp. When the stairs creaked and snapped suddenly beneath his feet, Eliphilet “near jumped clean out of his skin,” as the partner of his distress afterward stated to the neighbors, and repassing the dark attic stairs was

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a terrible test to the nerves of them both. Yet near the foot of the stairs they paused to listen once more. But now the only sound that drifted down to their strained ears was that of the sleeper's deep and regular breathing.

In the shelter of their chamber they softly turned the key in the lock and closed and fastened the wooden shutters. Then the farmer planted a chair facing the door and sat himself down on it with the ancient gun resting across his knees. Refusing to go to bed, Mrs. Pettigill occupied another chair, prepared to do whatever she could in defense of their lives if it became necessary.

And through the remainder of that summer night, while they watched and dozed and awakened to listen fearfully, Gifford Stone, his dreams of baseball having ceased for the time being, slept soundly and well in the little room under the peak of the roof.

CHAPTER VII

ANOTHER TRIAL

THE Lakeville Reds were having a prolonged streak of bad luck. The qualifying adverbs used by their peppery manager were infinitely more expressive, but even in his calm moments Monte Ward's conversation was frequently unsuitable for polite society unless strained through a fine sieve. Just now, fighting the Warren Sluggers on their own grounds, Monte felt that almost any brand of language was warranted. With his star pitcher going strong and receiving sensational support which kept the home team from pushing a single runner across the rubber for seven innings, he had begun to look on the three tallies, garnered early in the game, as sufficient to spell victory with something to spare. Then old Hard Luck got back on the job.

Monte pretended that he did not believe in luck. Whenever the Reds developed a hitting streak, or things in general went well with them, he credited it all to the personnel of his team. Let this be reversed, however, and Mr. Ward could howl like a wolf with its paw in a trap.

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To-day, for instance, when Pink Hepbron, the first baseman, ran against some hard and keen Slugger spikes which slashed about six inches of cuticle from one shin, Monte raved and raged and plucked at the umpire's garments in an effort to persuade that worthy that it was a barefaced case of deliberate interference for which no adequate penalty had been devised. The arbiter knew Monte, however, and the game went on with a substitute giving a feeble imitation of the accomplished and popular Hepbron.

This unfortunate occurrence took place in the first of the seventh. During the latter half of that inning the Sluggers worked the hit and run with a following squeeze which gave them the first tally they had scored, leaving the Reds a still comfortable margin. In the eighth the score was tied because of the inexcusable errors of the substitute first baseman, and Monte's remarks raised the temperature in his vicinity.

Still fighting, the Reds opened the ninth with a double made by Nevins, the right fielder. Unfortunately, in sliding to second Nevins hooked his spikes in the bag and nearly broke his ankle. It was impossible for him to continue playing, and a second substitute went in.

The roar which arose from Monte at this occur-

rence—he blamed the opposing second baseman for blocking off with intent to injure the runner—was as a soothing lullaby compared with the turmoil that followed when “Ferret” Brewer, the Red shortstop, colliding with the Slugger first baseman, turned an amazing somersault and landed heavily on his back. Piteously declaring that his back was broken, Ferrer was assisted to the bench, while his manager looked vitriolic floods of wrath upon the weary arbiter of the game, demanding that the criminal be banished from the field and the Sluggers penalized.

“Can it, Ward!” admonished the much tried official. “I didn’t see any interference. A little more of that brand of talk and I’ll chase you to cover. Dig up your substitute and go on with the game.”

“Substitute!” raved the manager. “Who’ve I got to put in—the bat boy? Kerr and Hepple are both sick, and Beef’s away. With three men put out of business by these hoodlums, it don’t look—”

“Oh, cut the beefing,” interrupted the umpire unfeelingly. “I don’t care whether you use your bat boy or one of your pitchers, but put in somebody sudden or sooner. Get a move on. Time!”

Still snarling and purple-faced, Ward turned

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toward the bench. Lefty Bemis was his last resort, and Lefty was an even poorer fielder than the average bush pitcher. But it was Lefty or the bat boy, and Monte's lips were parted to bawl an order to the southpaw when he became aware of a stranger at his elbow.

"Need a shortstop?" inquired a cool, low-pitched voice.

The manager whirled and stared, taking in the slight, immaculately garbed form and rather boyish face of his questioner.

"What gives you that notion?" he snarled. "I'm after a star tiddleywinks player. Know the game?"

"Tiddleywinks? Well, no; but I can play better baseball than some of those fellows that adorn your infield," was the reply.

Monte gasped at the stranger's amazing effrontery; his lips parted to "bawl out" the fresh guy, but closed again abruptly. In his less agitated moments he was not a half bad judge of men, and he realized now that what at first seemed to be mere brag and bluster was simply the calm statement of one who believed what he said. It impressed him, somehow, in spite of his better judgment. The fellow did not look at all like a ball

player, but one never can tell. The deep tan of face and hands at least bore evidence that he had been much in the open.

“Where’ve you played?” briefly inquired the manager, his manner thawing a trifle.

The stranger raised his shoulders slightly. “What difference does that make as long as I’m able to deliver the goods!” he returned evasively. “My name’s Stone, and I’ll guarantee to do a better job at short than that twirler of yours, who seems to be about the only sub left.”

Monte’s face cleared. This was some minor leaguer, probably, who had been up against the powers of organized baseball, possibly had been blacklisted. But outlaws were never frowned on by the manager of the Reds; though often erratic and difficult to handle, they were, at their best, almost invariably players of high caliber, and he decided to take a chance on this stranger.

“All right,” he agreed gruffly. “I’ll risk it. Beat it under the stand and climb into a suit as quick as you know how. Here, Lefty!”

Guided by the pitcher, Stone plunged into the cramped dressing room beneath the stand and flung on, piece by piece, the assorted garments laid out for him by the southpaw. When he came

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out, not more than two minutes later, the third batter had flied out, and the Reds were taking the field for the last of the ninth.

"Hold 'em now!" bellowed Ward, doing some "ragging" over back of third base. "You can do it. We'll eat 'em alive next inning."

"There ain't going to be no next innin'," retorted a Slugger. "Here's where we put you outer your mis'ry."

The bulk of fiercely partisan home fans added their clamor to the racket raised by the Slugger coaches, and when Splinter Todd drove the ball out on a line the crowd rose with a concerted shriek of triumph, which changed to a howl of bitter disappointment as the sphere smacked into the glove of a Red fielder. The second batter landed on the horsehide, smashing a daisy cutter between short and second. Leaping, Stone thrust out his covered hand and stopped its flight. The ball slipped from his fingers, but he went after it like a shot and whipped it over to first in ample time to catch the runner. Unhappily, the substitute on the initial sack muffed a good throw, the runner scuttling on to second. Compared with the bleachers and the stand, the dangerous ward of an insane asylum would have resembled a Sunday-school festival.

Then came a momentary lull, during which the fans entertained themselves by endeavoring to "get the goat" of the new shortstop who had been thrust upon their attention. Apparently they were not in the least successful; the stranger paid no more attention to them than he did to the seats they occupied. He was forgotten, however, when the next club swinger went out on a high foul that drew the wrath of the crowd down upon him.

With two of the enemy gone and but one sack tenanted, the situation looked fairly satisfactory to Monte Ward, and he added a cackling laugh to the coaching that was calculated to annoy the batter rather than to instruct the base runner. But the resentful hitter managed to poke out a slow grounder, beating the throw to first, while the man ahead of him was taking third. What remarks Monte made were happily drowned by the mad yelling of the spectators.

"Fan this dead one, Jim!" he begged of the pitcher. "He never made a hit in his life."

The batter really had no business to swing at the first ball pitched, which was wide of the plate, tried as a coaxer and with no thought that the willow wielder would be able to touch it. He not only touched it, but, getting it on the end of the bat, he drove it out in a line to the left of second.

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Stone saw the ball coming and knew that he could reach it if he went into the air for it. As he leaped a warning bellow of "Take it, Bill!" smote his ears and made him hesitate for a fraction of a second. It was a difficult catch at best, and that momentary relaxing of the muscles spelled failure. The horsehide clipped the tips of his reaching fingers and passed on with almost unchecked speed, though slightly diverted from its first straight course. When the shortstop landed on his feet and whirled round he saw the center fielder, who for some reason had been playing uncommonly far in, making a last desperate but unavailing lunge at the passing sphere.

The runner from third cantered home amid the howling of the delighted crowd. It seemed scarcely a moment later when Stone found himself facing the furious manager of the defeated Reds.

"You boob!" snarled Ward, purple in the face. "You lobster! Didn't you hear me yell for Bill to take it? Then you throw away the game by trying to pull a grand-stand play! You're a sweet ball player, you are! Any kid off'n the bleachers could show you how to play the game."

Stone had darkened a little under his tan; his eyes glinted ominously. "How was I to know

your fielder was laying in behind me?" he demanded. "If he'd been in his regular position he couldn't have touched that ball until after the game was over."

"How was you to know?" shrilled Monte. "What's your lamps for—and your ears? What you want is some sense hammered into your head, and I'd enjoy the job."

"Begin on it," invited Stone, growing warm. "You'll have a nice time. You're not fit to manage even a bush team—"

He stopped and put up his hands as Monte made an angry forward plunge. Quicker than either of them, however, was a short, square man, somewhat inclined to stoutness, who slipped suddenly between the two.

"That'll be enough," he remarked quietly.

"Get out of my way!" stormed the manager. "I'm going to punch that boob!"

"You'll have to wait." The stranger's tone was decided, the practiced ease with which he flipped back his coat was alone sufficient to proclaim his profession without the glimpse they all had of the silver star beneath. "I've got first mortgage on him." He glanced interestedly at the silent man beside him. "Some clever artist, you are," he murmured. "You're certainly a

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wonder, Kid—college boy and all that smooth stuff. I ain't surprised that you've put it across so often. You look the part.” Then he squared his shoulders with a decisive movement. “Well, let's get going.”

Stone gave a start as of one awakening from a trance, and his brows straightened in a frown. “Is this all meant for me?” he asked. “If so, I guess you've made a slight mistake. I'm not—”

“What's the use!” protested the official good-humoredly. “Don't try to work the old gag of mistaken identity. Save your breath. You've been a busy little penman, Kid, but I guess you'll have a chance to break stone a while before you raise another check.”

CHAPTER VIII

IN CUSTODY

STONE stared at the rural officer of the law, his face reddening, his eyes full of indignant amazement. The crowd pushed closer. Monte Ward had stepped back, and was regarding his erstwhile shortstop with a ludicrous expression of uncertainty.

“I don’t understand,” Stone said crisply. “If you mean that I—”

“Drop that bluff,” interrupted the detective, the good humor fading from his face and leaving it hard. “It don’t go! And don’t try any funny stuff unless you want a taste of the twisters. Where’d you leave your clothes?”

“In the dressing room under the stand,” answered Stone with surprising self-possession. Turning abruptly, he began to push his way through the crowd.

Gripping the young man’s arm, the detective kept close beside him. Reluctantly, and with many curious glances, the mob gave way, permitting

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them to cross the diamond toward the stand. The players of both teams followed in their wake.

"A crook!" exclaimed Monte Ward, in a tone of puzzled satisfaction. "I knew he wasn't no ball player, but I never sized him for what he is."

"You never can tell," put in the substitute first baseman, mentally thanking his stars for the diversion. He had a call-down coming to him, but the odds were in favor of that being forgotten in the excitement of the moment. "That guy looked pretty slick."

Not another word passed the prisoner's lips until they reached the seclusion of the dressing room. Then he turned on the detective. "You've evidently taken me for some one who's wanted by the police," he said. "Just as a special favor, would you mind letting me know who you think I am?"

"No thinking about it," replied the officer. "I know! You're Kid Robinson, alias 'George, the Penman.' Your specialty is posing as a college boy and passing out-of-town checks supposed to be drawn by papa, when you can't get hold of a good one to raise. The Protective Association's offered a reward of five hundred for your arrest and conviction."

There was a stir among those who had crowded

into the room. Then a Warren man exclaimed:

"Some record! Pretty soft for you, Brennan," he added. "Five centuries ain't bad for a day's work."

Suddenly the prisoner laughed. That laugh was clear, mirthful, and genuine, with a touch of relief in it. It made the ball players stare, the most of them in frank admiration at what they considered an exhibition of surprising nerve.

"Tell me, Brennan," Stone said coolly, "did you ever happen to see this versatile Robinson?"

"Maybe I have, and maybe I haven't," growled the officer.

"I'll give odds that you haven't. My name is Stone, and—"

"Of course you won't have any trouble in bringing forward a few reputable people to identify you, Mr. Stone," sneered Brennan.

For an instant the captive's smile faded; then he shrugged his shoulders. "It's up to you to produce the proof that I'm Robinson."

"It'll be produced in court. You'll deny next that you were in Ellsworth three weeks ago yesterday. S'pose I ought to warn you that anything you say now'll be used against you."

"Never mind that. I did happen to be in Ellsworth for about three hours on that day."

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Brennan looked triumphant, and winked at the listening crowd. He fancied himself very shrewd, and, thinking the arrested man would be liable to commit himself if allowed to talk, he had made only a perfunctory attempt to keep him from doing so. "You were there, and you gave Rollins the slip by sneaking out to Wilton, where you've been ever since."

"You're a wise one, Mr. Brennan," returned Stone. "How did you happen to know I'd left Wilton?"

"Got him going!" thought the self-satisfied officer. "If he keeps on chinning he'll own up to everything. And he can't say I didn't give him the regular warning." Aloud he replied: "Rube named Jennings came along with a spiel about seeing a safebreaker and maniac on the train from Wilton—"

"What's that got to do with me?" interrupted the prisoner impatiently. "Tell me that, if you please."

"I dunno," admitted Brennan. "But when he gave me a description of the party, I showed him a picture of Kid Robinson on one of the reward posters. 'That's him,' says Jennings, just like that; and I got inter action at once, or even quicker."

"I suppose you brought Jennings along to point me out?"

"Not much I didn't." Brennan chuckled craftily. "I've got no idea of splittin' that five hundred with a yap, Kid. I nabbed you, and all the dough is mine. Now, peel that baseball rig, and get into your own togs. We'll get a move on."

For a moment the prisoner made no effort to obey, but stood frowning at the detective, a troubled wrinkle in his forehead. Then, without comment of any sort, he walked over to where he had left his clothes, and began to change. He dressed carefully, apparently oblivious to the rough humor of Monte Ward and his associates. Nor did he have anything to say when he was marched away by the officer, who kept a tight grip on him. Apparently he realized the hopelessness of trying further bluffing, and the triumphant country sleuth watched him narrowly, on the alert for any sudden attempt to break away. On the way to headquarters, Brennan noted that the prisoner not only remained silent, but showed distinct signs of worriment, which was accepted as a satisfying token that he realized the gravity of his situation. On arriving there they found the representative of the Bankers' Pro-

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tective Association—a slim, youngish man in a gray suit—awaiting their appearance.

“Well, I’ve got him for you, Mr. Rollins,” announced Brennan. “Phoned you I’d have him here inside an hour. I’m a man of my word.”

The newcomer’s light-gray eyes flickered for an instant over the prisoner. Then he looked hard at Brennan, and frowned. “Are you?” he said. “Where is he?”

Like a pricked balloon, Brennan’s complacency collapsed. His jaw sagged. For a moment he seemed incapable of speech. “Wh-where?” he stammered at length. “Why, ain’t this him?”

Rollins looked disappointed, not to say disgusted. “That man Robinson!” he exclaimed. “About as much as I am! While you’ve been picking up the wrong man, the Kid’s made his getaway. Well, what could I expect!” Without another word, he turned and left the room.

The bitterly crestfallen officer, realizing that the reward money he had already fingered in his imagination was not coming to him after all, made gurgling sounds in his throat, his face pale as putty. Finally he managed to gasp:

“Well, may I be kicked!”

“You may,” said Gifford Stone, “and it would give me pleasure to do the job.”

CHAPTER IX

KELLEY, OF THE SLUGGERS

AT no time had Stone been troubled by the fear of being permanently mistaken for the versatile and elusive Kid Robinson. He realized that he must in some degree resemble the criminal to account for Brennan's identification, but he had looked forward confidently to what would happen the moment some one who had seen Robinson appeared on the scene.

He had also looked forward with some amusement to the discomfiture of the bumptious rural sleuth, but Brennan's casual reference to newspapers caused him promptly to realize how much undesirable publicity he would be likely to acquire through the appearance of the story. At a time when he wished to evade the limelight this would be unfortunate. The affair was almost sure to be written up, and his name would appear in print. Even though Warren was not a large town, other newspapers would be likely to copy the story, and in this manner it might travel until it came to the attention of certain persons

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whom Stone very much desired to keep in total darkness concerning his movements. Therefore his mind had been perplexed over the problem of throttling the story at its source. Now, of a sudden, he fancied he saw a way to choke it. So he threatened to bring suit for false arrest unless the detective did his best to prevent any mention of his name by the newspapers.

It worked. Brennan, aghast and dazed by the unpleasant shock to his professional dignity, was only too thankful to escape so easily. "I got a pull with them newspaper guys, Mr. Stone," he asserted. "If they print the story and use either your name or mine, they won't git no more police news through me, and I'll tell them that."

"He'll keep his word," the young man thought, with a grim smile, as he strolled down the street. "He's about as anxious as I am to prevent the yarn from spreading."

Arriving at the Mansion House, Gifford paused critically to survey its exterior. It was not inviting; but, after a moment's hesitation, he entered and engaged a room. Having secured his bag from the station, and eaten a fairly satisfactory supper, he approached the desk for a chat with the clerk. Within five minutes, he found that he

had come to the right source for information. Mr. Otis Tufts was well posted on any subject pertaining to Warren and the vicinity, and his hobby was baseball. Though not present at the game that afternoon, he had learned all the details, save only the name under which the notorious Kid Robinson had played for half an inning, and, in view of the forger's versatility in nomenclature, he considered that of small importance. Glad that he took this view of it, Stone continued his inquiries about the Warren County League and its component parts. The impression obtained from the clerk was that for the most part the players of the various teams were fighters who rather preferred settling disputes with their fists than otherwise.

Naturally, Mr. Tufts favored his home team, and he was unaffectedly proud of the pugilistic abilities of certain members whom he named. He pronounced the game that day extremely tame, but prophesied a "hot one" when the Sluggers and the Rocktown Panthers met the following afternoon.

"At straight baseball they ain't in it with our boys, but they're no quitters, and they'll fight till the last man is out—and afterward, sometimes,"

he conceded with grudging admiration. "There'll be something doing at the park to-morrow, believe me!"

Having mulled over the information gleaned from Mr. Tufts, Stone sought the ball grounds the following day at two-thirty, and secured a seat in the rear of the stand without being recognized as the cause of the previous day's excitement. From this perch, he beheld an exhibition of strenuous baseball that was not exactly encouraging to a naturally peace-loving disposition.

From the very start, the Panthers seemed to be balancing chips on both shoulders, while their opponents assumed a bristling demeanor characteristic of terriers circling for an opening. The first three innings were scoreless, and passed without an actual clash. With the leading run, secured by the Sluggers in the fourth, the threatened trouble began. Rothe, the Warren left fielder, was given the shoulder by the visiting first baseman, and in the resulting mix-up, the Panther was badly spiked. Both men were put off the field. The ball thus started rolling was pushed merrily along. Altercations and disputes followed swiftly. Few of the umpire's decisions met with general approval, and that official was repeatedly surrounded by a throng of snarling, ges-

ticulating men, whom he handled with the consummate ease of long practice, assisted materially by a powerful physique.

There were various minor mishaps to enliven the next four innings and rouse the temper of both teams to the breaking point. The clash came abruptly in the first of the eighth. Some trivial dispute was like a spark to powder, and in a flash the majority of players were grappling in a free-for-all fight on the diamond. It was not of long duration, for the offending Panthers fled to shelter before the rush of angry fans tumbling down on to the field from the bleachers. The game was over.

Stone had followed its progress with astonished disapproval. It was even worse than he had supposed baseball as played in the bushes could be. After the fracas, he remained in his seat, his doubt and perplexity contending with a grim determination.

Determination won, and brought him, after a hurried supper, to the gate of an attractive little house on a side street not far from the ball park. A square, chunky man, with a fresh strip of plaster across the bridge of his nose, rocked in coatless ease on the piazza.

“Good evening, Mr. Kelley,” said Gifford.

“Evening, son,” returned the manager, his

shrewd blue eyes gleaming quizzically. "So they found out you weren't that forging chap, did they?"

"They did," answered Stone. "But how did you—"

James J. Kelley shrugged his shoulders slightly. "I can usually spot a crook when I lamp him," he declared. "Besides, I was born and raised in the same town with Pete Brennan. He's the biggest four-flusher alive. Have a chair."

Stone accepted the invitation. "Mr. Kelley," he said, without beating around the bush, "I think I'm adapted to fill a hole in your infield."

"You do, hey? I kinder reckoned you were going to hit me up for a job when you hove in view. And I've got a hole to fill. Monte Ward didn't give you much of a show." The man's eyes were twinkling more than ever now. "Did you happen to see the game to-day?"

"Yes."

"And you still want to play in the Warren County League?"

"Sure."

Kelley fingered his plastered nose lightly. "I wonder why?" he ruminated. "What do they call you?"

“Stone.”

“Stone, eh? Stone!” Gifford caught a flash of thoughtful speculation in the blue eyes bent suddenly on him. “Where have you played?”

Recalling the effect of evasiveness on one bush manager, Gifford tried it again. “If I make good, that doesn’t matter, does it?”

“Not with me if you’ve got the goods,” answered Kelley. “I was curious, that’s all. No contracts lying around loose, is there? No strings hitched to you?”

“Not any.”

“Guess I’ll give you a try-out, then. I was watching you yesterday. Got a notion you can play the game, but you won’t last long if I’m mistaken. A bluff won’t carry you far with me. Drop in at the ball park about nine to-morrow.”

CHAPTER X

A FROSTY RECEPTION

THE Sluggers, minus two of their members, who had been incapacitated through taking a hand in the fracas of the day before, were gathered in the dressing room. Most of them did not seem seriously to regard the fight which had broken up the game. As they leisurely donned their working clothes, some of them amused themselves by joshing certain others who had suffered most from the onslaught of the belligerent Panthers. Some of the battered ones merely grinned and retorted to the best of their ability, as if the affair were the commonplace part of everyday routine. Two or three were sullen, but their vows of a speedy and effective revenge were lost in the general chaffing.

To them appeared Manager Kelley, brisk and businesslike, his keen blue eyes shifting rapidly around the room, as if in search of some one. "New man shown up yet?" he inquired generally. "New man?" drawled Buck Dyer, whose fistic

skill, no less than a very effective brand of pitching, had made him a somewhat privileged character. "Have you signed on another white hope to keep us in the running?"

"Not so you could notice it. It's ball players I'm after now, and he claims to be a real one who can plug a yawning gap in my infield."

The shot produced instant and effective silence. Everybody sat up and took notice. The majority evinced only curiosity, but on the countenances of the three infielders present—Tappin, the second baseman, was one of the two laid up—were distinct traces of uneasiness.

"Anyhow," ventured Dyer, "I hope he's a husky buck. We need some more beef, or we'll be the laughing-stock of the league. That mix-up yesterday was a disgrace. Can he handle his dukes?"

"I didn't inquire," rejoined Kelley grimly. A smile lingered on his lips, but into his voice had crept a note of seriousness. "You're right, it was a disgrace, Buck. It's up to us to go slow on the rough stuff. There's too much Donnybrook Fair to baseball as played in this league, and it's gone the limit."

"But the crowd likes it, Jim," protested Bull Johnson, the heavyweight backstop. "They

won't think they've got their money's worth unless we show a little ginger."

"There's a bunch of roughnecks at every game who try to stir up trouble," retorted the manager. "But the bulk of fans—the ones who pay your salaries—come out to see baseball, not slugging matches. Unless I'm 'way off, they've stood about all they're going to. Don't get me wrong, now; I don't mean that we're going to lay down and be tramped over by any team, but I'm going to try the experiment of using our heads to play the game, and letting the umpires settle the disputes. We'll can the rough stuff and do a little more work with our beans hereafter."

"In other words," put in Dyer sardonically, "you think we're weak in the brain department, so you've hired this new infielder of yours to teach us baseball. What is he, anyhow, a college guy, or—"

He stopped abruptly, and stared with widening eyes at the almost boyish figure that had appeared in the open doorway. The others followed the direction of his gaze, and for a moment there was dead silence, broken by a chorus of surprised exclamations:

"Look who's here! Kid Robinson!"

"If it ain't George, the Penman!"

“Pete Brennan’s forger, by smoke!”

“What do you know about that!”

A faint flush crept into the new man’s face, but he smiled quite naturally. Then the manager spoke again.

“Away off,” said Kelley briskly. “As usual, Pete balled things up and nabbed the wrong man. Shake hands with Stone, who’s going to try out for second or short this morning.”

The ceremony was brief and quite formal. No one had anything to say beyond stereotyped words of greeting, but each gave the new candidate a searching scrutiny which seemed to miss nothing. Pink Ziegler, who had been filling the short field, glowered malevolently. The atmosphere was not exactly freighted with joy and good-fellowship, but the newcomer seemed oblivious to its chilliness as he stripped and got into the uniform he had brought with him.

“Stone!” commented Bull Johnson, in an audible aside, as the men trooped out upon the field. “Looks to me like a pebble, and a mighty small one, at that.”

“He’s just what I thought—a college boy,” put in Dyer. “Did you lamp that get-up of his? Waow! Jim must be ready for the foolish foundry, thinking that gink knows baseball. Wait till

I hand gentle Lucy that fast jump ball of mine, and see him wilt."

But the peerless Buck, as well as the remainder of the team, was destined to be surprised. In batting practice, not only did the newcomer hammer Dyer's jump ball with apparent ease, but he seemed to find little difficulty in making connections with anything the pitcher put over. James J. Kelley, watching critically, began to figure out the question of salary. It was otherwise with the Warren League players. The very fact that this newcomer had upset their calculations was sufficient to make them sour on him. When he had proved the possession not only of an uncommon batting eye, but likewise of a well-oiled brain and a very fair ability at fielding, the Sluggers with one accord began to look elsewhere for the defects that they felt sure existed.

"Wait till he gets up against the Panthers or the Reds in a real game," said one; "then the yellow streak will come out."

They were not a bad lot at heart, and they were disposed to be fair according to their own lights. But the strenuousness of the game as played in the Warren County League had made them uncommonly clannish, sticking by each other through

thick and thin, always ready to fly to the defense of a team-mate, no matter what might be the nature of his difficulty. They resented the introduction of this stranger among them, resented even more keenly the implication that he could teach them anything about baseball. It was inevitable that they should give him the cold shoulder, find fault with his looks, his dress, his manner, and do their best to pick flaws in his performance on the diamond. And if all other incentives failed, the two infielders, Ziegler and Tappin, could be counted on to keep the entire team stirred up against this upstart who threatened to usurp the place of one or the other of them.

There was no game scheduled for that afternoon, but they were to play the Reds at Lakeville next day. When Manager Kelley intimated that he meant to try the newcomer at short, shifting Ziegler to second in place of the still incapacitated Tappin, grim expectancy lurked in more than one face.

On their home grounds, the Reds would certainly do their best to take revenge for their last defeat at the hands of the Sluggers—a defeat which Monte Ward laid entirely to the crooked playing of his opponents. Their methods were

not likely to be particularly scrupulous or gentle, and the new recruit was pretty sure to come in for even more than his share of their attention.

"He'll last just about three innings with that crowd," said Dyer, as he left the grounds that night with Ziegler. "They'll get his goat quick. I wouldn't do any worrying if I were you, Pink. It's a hundred-to-one shot you'll be back at short for the next game."

CHAPTER XI

THE TEST OF THE BUSH

LOOKING slight and boyish in his baseball suit, Gifford Stone—"Pebble," as he had been unanimously rechristened—took his seat on the visitors' bench with the rest of the team. Outwardly, he seemed cool and composed almost to indifference, and Pink Ziegler, eying him surreptitiously, was moved to justifiable wrath as the thought occurred to him that possibly the expected humiliation and downfall of his rival might not take place.

The disgruntled infielder would have been somewhat reassured by a glimpse behind the mask—for that apparent indifference was a mask. In reality, Stone was far from cool, and not at all composed. His nerves were tingling at the thought of the ordeal before him, and he was resentful toward the men who sat beside him, touching shoulders and rubbing elbows, yet paying no more attention to him than if he had not existed. He hardly expected them to fall on his neck and welcome him to the team with open arms, but at

least they might treat him as a human being. He had done his best to meet them half-way, but not one of them had spoken a civil word to him since his first appearance for practice the day before. He knew nothing of the characteristic methods of the Reds save that they would probably try to work something tricky whenever they found a chance. It would seem a natural thing for his teammates to warn him what to expect from this man or that, but instead, one and all, they maintained utter silence, which brought with it the slow conviction that they expected him to show the white feather, and were waiting with pleasurable anticipation for that to occur.

As Stone thought of this, his indignation increased, which was, perhaps, the best thing that could have happened. His nervousness was swept into the background by a stubborn determination to thwart and disappoint them all—to succeed unaided and in spite of obstacles. He had not doubted his ability to hold his own in the bush at straight baseball. It was what Kelley had termed the "rough stuff" that troubled him, for he was not naturally combative, and his distaste for brawls was instinctive. But before his turn came to step up to the plate, he had nerved himself to the point of facing anything.

He had been placed fourth on the batting list, and this had given fresh umbrage to the rest of the team. To give a callow greenhorn the "clean-up" position seemed positively insulting, and made more than one of the Sluggers, anxious as they were to hammer out a victory from the Reds, secretly hope to see the upstart fan ignominiously.

"Little Georgie, the Penman!" cackled Monte Ward, of the Reds, as Stone stepped quickly to the pan. "A cinch, Lefty. Show him the difference between drawing checks and drawing a hit."

It was crude, but Monte's wit was not of the subtle order. The Reds, understanding his allusion, roared with delight.

Beyond a slightly perceptible tightening of the jaw, Stone showed no signs of hearing the storm of comment, much less resenting it. It mattered little to him what the Lakeville populace thought or said. His whole mind was centered on Lefty Bemis, grinning at him from the mound in a manner which showed that the southpaw had little doubt of his ability to settle this new man.

Neither Bemis, nor any other of the Reds, had seen Stone bat. They probably had no idea he could hit. Pebble's lids drooped, and his hold on the hickory tightened. An instant later, when the

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port-side flinger put over a slow coaxter, the batter swung much too soon, with a slightly flustered air, which brought a burst of laughter from the amused Reds.

"Careful, sonny, or you'll break that bat," snickered the catcher. "Don't hit the pill out of the lot."

"Move the fence back!" shouted the first baseman, waving his arms toward the outfielders.

Encouraged by Monte Ward, the crowd howled still more tauntingly at the seemingly shrinking batter. Jim Kelley's voice was raised in encouragement, but the remainder of the Sluggers were silent, although coaching a batter from the bench was far from a rare thing in the Warren County League.

Dancing off second, Tad Driscoll scowled and growled. If Kelley had only shown the sense he was born with, there might still be a chance in spite of Rothe's unlooked-for fouling out after Conway's sacrifice. But now— Oh, well, James J. would wake up to his mistake before long, and when this happened the college shrimp would get his congé in a hurry.

Pebble fanned the air a second time, and a still more joyous whoop went up from stand and

bleachers. This latest acquisition of the Sluggers was evidently a huge joke, and the spectators prepared to extract the utmost possible enjoyment from his diverting awkwardness. Wide grins decorated the faces of the home team. Choice witticisms were hurled at the apparently demoralized batter, Manager Kelley, and the Sluggers generally.

“The little runt!” grated the raging Driscoll. “I knew he’d be so scared he couldn’t hit in a real game. And that’s what Jim picked to show us class in baseball!”

There was a sudden ringing, electrifying crash of a bat and ball meeting fairly and sharply. The sound cut through the babel of jeers and catcalls. His growling complaint instantly choked, Driscoll dug his spikes into the ground and leaped toward third. From the stands came a gasp of surprised dismay, followed by dead silence. In another instant this silence was broken by the clatter of a multitude leaping to its feet. Close on the heels of that came the shrill, barking fire of frenzied admonition from the coaches, stung suddenly to action by the amazing unexpectedness of what had happened.

The batter’s little trick had worked. Lulled

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into false security, Bemis had grown careless, and Pebble, picking a ball that seemed made to order, smashed it out for two sacks.

He pulled himself up at second, panting a little, and tingling all over with the thrill of accomplishment. But that thrill was swiftly chilled by the utter lack of comment from the bench. Not a soul save Kelley, on the coaching line, threw him a solitary word of encouragement. And that hit had sent Driscoll cantering easily across the rubber.

“Talk about fool’s luck!” growled Pink Ziegler, voicing the feeling of the majority as he grabbed a bat and hustled to the pan. “He carries a rabbit’s foot, all right!”

Having expected his rival to fan, he had not reckoned on being up in this inning, and perhaps that accounted for his failure to make a hit. At all events, he popped up a weak infield fly, then took his place on the diamond.

Stone made no great impression during the last half of the inning. True, he handled the two chances that came his way, but both were easy ones which the veriest tyro could scarcely have bungled. Monte Ward saw nothing in this fielding to make him reverse his former opinion of

the young man, and he jeered the rival manager on his acquisition of a hopeless player.

"You certainly picked a quince, Jim," he sneered. "I wouldn't have him wished on me if he was set with diamonds."

Kelley smiled blandly. "Wait!" he advised. "As a rule, you know it all, Monte; but rules get busted sometimes. Mebbe the youngster's all right."

"He is," returned Monte, "from the head up and the feet down. The rest of him's N. G."

"How about that two-bagger?"

"Horseshoe luck, that's all. If he gets another like that, I'll swaller the ball."

In the second inning, Pebble handled his only fielding chance, a sizzling liner, in a manner which made Monte open his eyes a little. In the third, a clever sacrifice bunt still further surprised the cocksure manager of the Reds. Nothing could have caused Monte to confess himself in the wrong, but from that moment his sneers were conspicuous by their infrequence.

Returning to the bench after his bunt, Stone passed along the front of the stand, his head bent and his cap pulled over his eyes. He was striving to banish the fruitless irritation caused by

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his teammates' treatment, but not succeeding very well, when suddenly from close at hand a clear, girlish voice smote on his ears like a thunderclap. It was a voice he knew only too well. The sound aroused memories at once pleasant and poignant. The words themselves brought his heart into his throat in a spasm of intense concern.

"How much that shortstop looks like Gifford Stone!" the girl said.

CHAPTER XII

BAD BLOOD

FOR a fraction of a second, the ball player seemed rooted to the spot before he had the wit to turn away, drop on one knee, and fumble with the laces of his shoe. Under his tan, he felt his face flaming, but even at that moment he realized with thankfulness that this rush of color could not be distinguished from sunburn.

“Do you think so, dear?” questioned another voice, a little affected in accent, and also familiar. “They’re about the same height, but I can’t see any further resemblance. Can you picture Gifford playing ball?”

She laughed, and the young man’s neck grew crimson. He had always disliked Laura Reid’s laugh; now it seemed detestable. But he was not particularly interested in Laura. It was the unexpected presence of Hermia Meredith that had startled him, and made him risk discovery merely to hear what she had to say.

“Scarcely,” was the amused reply; “though

I'm sure it would be diverting. Baseball isn't his forte."

"Nor anything else of a strenuous nature, I fancy," laughed Miss Reid. "But I suppose I shouldn't have said that, Hermia. You and he are very good friends, aren't you?"

"We're good friends, but—"

"Of course!" interrupted the volatile Laura significantly. "I seem to be woolgathering to-day. I don't blame you for preferring the other man. He's really charming, and such a wonderful athlete; quite different from poor Giff. I hope you aren't keeping a secret from me, dear?"

The last sentence, uttered in a low tone, made Stone straighten with a jerk and hurry away, his face flaming. He had received the listener's penalty, and as he dropped down on the bench, his grudge against the team momentarily swallowed up in this greater irritation, he berated himself again and again for having obeyed the impulse to pause and hear what was being said about him.

Stinging as were those comments on himself, it was not that part of the dialogue which struck him deepest. He would have given the world to believe that last speech of Laura Reid's the mere figment of a gossip-loving nature, but he could not. It all fitted in too perfectly with his own

observations and deductions. Chalmers Robinson was the only man whose attentions to Miss Meredith were marked enough to arouse even the whisper of an engagement. He was indeed a fine athlete, but Gifford had, so far, failed to see anything charming about this ornamental classmate of his. Now, gripped by the anger that rose within him, he disliked the fellow with the intensity which only jealousy can arouse.

Anger of any sort is not conducive to good ball playing, as Gifford discovered when he presently missed two fielding chances, and brought down upon his head another wave of jeering comment from the crowd. Instead of flustering him, however, this had the effect of a cold douche, clearing his brain, and bringing his mind back to the exigencies of the game. He had an added incentive now for straining every nerve and doing his best. It was more than doubtful, considering his heavy tan, the new erectness which made the most of his scant inches, and the disguising uniform, that those two in the stand would recognize him. But whether they did or not, he meant to take no chances of again hearing his playing characterized as "diverting." For the following three innings he exhibited a brand of baseball which, although not errorless, was at least snappy, and in that

time his one misplay was caused by trying for a ground drive that not one busher in three would have attempted to touch. He seemed not content to cover his own territory, but frequently encroached on that of third and second, much to the indignation of Pink Ziegler, who finally complained to Kelley. He received little satisfaction.

"Wake up and get there first," was the manager's advice. "The kid's covering twice as much ground as you, and he don't duck a hard chance to dodge an error."

James J. still believed in the possibilities of his find, but the latter's work brought no change of opinion in the rest of the team. They continued to treat him coldly, awaiting confidently the fulfillment of their prophecy.

Up to the seventh inning, the game had been singularly free from the rowdyism which usually characterized contests in that league. Not only had Kelley issued strict injunctions against rough work, but he had beguiled the rival manager into doing the same thing, and the result was an exhibition of straight, clean playing to which the Lakeville fans had long been strangers.

The majority seemed to like it, but as is frequently the case, the vocal power of the minority was in its ascendency. Early in the game, a clique

of leather-lunged rooters in the bleachers began to howl for "pepper," "ginger," and the like, bawling anathemas on the Sluggers, whenever they scored a point, and finally centering their storm of abuse on two of the visitors—Buck Dyer, whose pugnacious repartee always got him in disfavor with the crowd, and Stone, whose hitting was responsible for the visitors' lead of two runs.

Naturally the Reds chafed and fretted under the unaccustomed restraint, and in the sixth inning they showed strong signs of reverting to their old tactics. The seventh opened with a feeling of tension in the air.

"Don't none of you boys start anything," admonished Kelley, as the Reds took the field. "I ain't going to have it said I can't live up to my own rules. If there's any disputes, hold up, and let the umpire settle it."

Pebble happened to be the first man up, and he led off with a single. As he tore down the base line, he saw Hepbron jump astride the sack in a manner indicating an intention to give the runner the shoulder while pretending to be waiting for the throw from the opposite side of the diamond, which could not possibly reach him in time for a put-out. Quick as thought, Gifford

flung himself at the hassock, feet first, causing the baseman to make a wild and lively leap in order to save his shins from the spikes. Although any discerning person must have perceived that Hepbron had been balked in attempting to foul an opposing player, he immediately let out a roar, and began threatening the runner.

Stone scrambled quickly to his feet, ignoring the bristling guardian of the initial sack. A few seconds later, he was sprinting down the line as Pink Ziegler smashed a hot grounder toward second, just out of reach of Bemis.

Bill Lynch, who held down the cushion at that corner of the diamond, lunged in to get the ball, but Gifford did not attempt to check himself or turn aside. His judgment told him that the second baseman could not handle the hot skipper, even if he were able to touch it. What followed was perfectly obvious to most of the watching players of both teams, if not to the bulk of the spectators. Pretending to dive after the ball, though he hadn't a chance of coming within ten feet of it, Lynch dodged forward across the line, whipping his left leg out behind him, catching the runner in the middle of a stride, and sending him crashing to the ground, breathless and stunned. By the time he had recovered from his daze and



Lynch dodged forward across the line, whipping his left leg out behind him.
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staggered to his feet, the center fielder had secured the ball and lined it to the shortstop, who covered the sack.

“Out at second!” declared the umpire, whose view of the performance had been somewhat blocked by the pitcher’s lanky form.

Amidst the storm of protest that arose from the Sluggers, Pebble whirled on the tricky baseman, his fists clenched, his eyes flashing. For an instant a fight seemed inevitable. Then, to the amazement of every one, the Slugger shortstop turned abruptly on his heel, and limped toward the bench.

Kelley was occupied in vigorously disputing the umpire’s decision as Gifford approached the group of Sluggers near the bench. The battery of scornful eyes fairly withered the new man.

“Yellow!” sneered Buck Dyer to the man next him, in a more subtly insulting manner than as if he had spoken directly to Stone. “A man who’ll swallow a dirty deal like that hasn’t an ounce of grit in his carcass. He’s yellow as a pumpkin, and just about as soft.”

CHAPTER XIII

MANAGER KELLEY'S QUESTION

PEBBLE STONE gulped, and turned white under his tan. Then his eyes blazed and he took a swift step forward. "You'll have to take that back!" he said in a queer, jerky voice.

Buck Dyer merely stared insolently down on him. "Don't strain yourself," he drawled contemptuously. "Nobody's going to swallow that bluff. You wouldn't fight if—"

The appearance among them of James J. Kelley in a state of temper not to be trifled with cut short the pitcher's words and the argument at one and the same time. A crisp order sent Dyer out to take his turn at bat; the others hurriedly resumed their places on the bench. Stone turned his back so abruptly that he missed the searching look of amazement in the veteran manager's keen blue eyes.

The new man was trembling with rage, yet striving with all his might to regain self-control.

He detested fighting, yet never in all his life had he wanted to do anything so much as to plant a blow on the sneering, insolent face of the man who had insulted him. He knew that such an action would not help his case, yet the savage impulse was so strong that he had to fight against it with all the will power he possessed.

At last he conquered. Pulling himself together, he assumed a semblance of composure, although it was superficial. Underneath it anger lingered, transformed to a cold, calculating determination to "show them." It was that cold determination which dominated him during the final innings, and made him brilliantly accept the chances that came his way. Knowing that Dyer and others were counting on him to blow up in some way, he took a grim satisfaction in thwarting their expectations. He soon drove the slower-moving Ziegler to the point of purple exasperation by the frequency with which he invaded the baseman's territory and took assists and put-outs unto himself. When he came to bat for the last time, he smashed a clean drive through the infield, and passed Hepbron a laugh when the first baseman gave him plenty of room. Going down to second, he slid under full headway, compelling Lynch to dodge his spikes. Yellow, was he? Let them guess

again! And finally he crossed the plate with the run which practically won the game.

Yet it brought him little real satisfaction. He had shown the crowd that he was far from being a mere flash in the pan, but that did not seem to be what he wanted. The lurking desire for a physical clash with the man who had insulted him had not been altogether banished. The savage in him still contended with his other self—that civilized and refined portion of his nature which abhorred brawls and considered brute force of little actual value in righting a wrong. This produced an unsettled, low-spirited state of mind commonly called a grouch. With an air of cold aloofness, he went through the process of dressing, utterly indifferent to the men about him. Had one of them made friendly overtures now, he would have met a rebuff. The time for that was past. Even Jim Kelley's hearty words of praise and encouragement were received coldly and answered in monosyllables. At the station, he lingered until the Sluggers, laughing and joking over their victory, climbed aboard the train, and took possession of the last car. Then he walked to the forward one and took a seat by himself.

Dyer's insult, and the mental turmoil it pro-

duced, had driven all thoughts of the two girls in the stand from his mind, but he suddenly remembered them, and wondered over their appearance in Lakeville. He knew that the Reids had a summer home somewhere on the coast; perhaps Hermia was visiting her friend Laura. Some twist of events had brought them to this town and led them to take in the ball game.

The train had started, and he was staring moodily out at the flying landscape, wondering how much the girls had seen of his humiliation, when some one stopped beside his seat. He looked up into Kelley's twinkling eyes.

"Move along a base and make room," requested James J. good-humoredly.

In his present mood, Stone would have much preferred riding alone, but even his ill humor was not proof against the smiling manager.

"I see I'm forced," he said, hitching toward the window.

"I s'pose I oughta give you a call-down," said the manager, as he made himself comfortable.

"If it's due, let it come," responded Pebble indifferently.

"You tried to play all over the yard, but I let you go as long's it was likely to make some of my Charley-hoss stiffs take a brace. Anyhow,

you seem to have a battin' eye. And, what give me the most satisfaction, you had Monte Ward chokin' till he was black in the face."

"You think I'll do, then?" inquired the short-stop, with a lack of interest in his tone.

"Oh, mebbe so, mebbe so," answered James J. "There's plenty about the game that you don't know, but you're the kind that learns. You oughter develop into a real ball player in time, if you don't get stuck on yourself. Now, what I'd like to know is where you've played before."

Glancing up quickly, Gifford met the older man's gaze fixed intently on him. Mingled with curiosity there was a touch of deeper interest, and something like suspense, which seemed rather uncalled for, considering the trivial nature of the question. It made Stone almost ashamed of his poor little attempt at creating a mystery.

"I never played on a professional team before, if that's what you mean," he explained frankly. "My experience has been limited to the freshman nine at college.

"Well," said the manager, as if doubtful, "you sure made good use of your time, then. Is Stone your regular moniker, or one you took for the pro-fesh?"

"My own," was the prompt assurance. "Did you think I was ashamed of playing ball?"

"No; but some college men take another name so's not to be branded professional. What made me ask, though, was because Stone happens to be the handle of one of the greatest all-round ball players I ever knew—old Bliss Stone. Mebbe you've heard of him?"

The shortstop hesitated an instant before nodding slightly. "Yes, I think I have. Old-timer, wasn't he?"

"One of the best of 'em. There never was another infielder like Blister—that's what everybody called him in those days. Him and me was pals for two seasons with the Pirates. Them was the good old times, all right."

Gifford did not look up, and presently Kelley asked abruptly:

"Say, does old Blister happen to be your dad?"

CHAPTER XIV

THE REASON WHY

STONE lifted his head sharply and turned a pair of astonished eyes upon the manager as he heard the latter's question.

"My father!" he exclaimed. "Why, what makes you think— That is, how—"

Before the other's steady scrutiny, he faltered, flushed, stopped. After a moment, he gave Kelley something like a defiant look.

"Well," he questioned crisply, "what if he is?"

James J.'s rugged face was suddenly split from ear to ear by a grin; his huge brown paw descended on the young man's knee with force which made him wince. "Nailed you, didn't I!" he roared, with a great laugh. "As a hit that was a sack cleaner. To think of meeting up with old Blister's boy like this—having him on my bush team! Why, I haven't lamped the old scout for years and years. No wonder you cover the infield like a carpet, son, with such a dad!"

"What made you suspect?" asked Gifford. He

was looking away again, a frowning line between his brows. "We don't look in the least alike."

"Not a bit," agreed Kelley. "You're as different as a foul and a safe hit—except when your dander's up. That's what give me the notion first, the look on your mug after Lynch tripped you at second. I says to myself: 'It's old Blister all over again.' Can't tell you just what it was—something about the eyes, the chin, the set of your lips—but it took me back twenty years as quick as a flash. Then I remembered the name, and you could have knocked me down with a feather." He chuckled and settled back in the seat. "So you're follerin' in dad's footsteps, eh? He started in the sticks, like most of the rest of us. What's he think of it?"

"He doesn't think," answered Gifford. "He hasn't any idea what I'm doing, and I don't want him to have—yet."

"Oh, going to slip one over on him," said the manager. "I get your signals, son. Going to hand him a surprise. Don't worry; I'll keep my trap shut. Blood will tell. Being old Blister's son, I reckon you simply had to get into the game."

"You're wrong!" The younger man's voice was emphatic. "I don't like the game!"

Kelley's jaw sagged, and he stared in bewilderment at Stone's grim face. "You—what?" he exclaimed.

"I don't like baseball. I never have and never shall. You wouldn't if the thing had been thrust down your throat from the time you were old enough to walk; dinned into your ears and dangled before your eyes until the sight of a bat or ball made you sick." The words came from Gifford's lips with an intensity which denoted a self-restrained nature that had bottled up its wrongs too long. "From the time I was born, my father set his heart on making a professional ball player of me. But he couldn't have chosen a worse way. When I was only a kid, I had to exercise in the gym for hours at a time, throwing, catching, running—every day the same thing over and over again. I couldn't do the things I wanted to till all that business was out of the way—then I was generally too tired to do anything. It was almost as bad at boarding school, with the gym and drill and all the rest of it. I was dragged to games when I didn't want to go. Between times he talked baseball by the yard before I knew what half the terms meant. If I'd been let alone perhaps I might have liked the game, as other fellows do. As it is, there's nothing I dislike more."

Stopping abruptly, as if suddenly ashamed of the outburst, he glowered out of the dingy window.

Kelley stirred uneasily. "I think I get you," he said after a moment of thought; "but you had me fanning for a minute. He took the wrong tack with you. But if you feel that way, whisper in my ear and tell me what you're doing here."

"I mean to show him!" Stone answered. "He gave me up years ago, but he's never quit throwing it in my teeth. One day he told me I hadn't the sense to make even a decent bat boy. He said if I had to live on what I could earn as a ball player, I'd starve. I've got a theory that baseball isn't any more difficult to succeed at than anything else a fellow makes up his mind to do. Hard work, brains, condition, and sticking to it will make a player out of almost any man. It'll be a waste of time, but I'm going to pull it off."

Kelley shook his head. "Never!" he said. "A man's got to have a likin', and a strong one, too, for anything he goes into, in order to make a real success of it."

He surveyed the profile of the youth beside him with searching curiosity. Presently a slow, grim smile crooked the big mouth. "But take it from me," he added; "you're goin' to like it. There's more of old Blister in you than I thought."

CHAPTER XV.

DYER IN TROUBLE

IN a calmer mood, Gifford Stone was ashamed of his somewhat emotional outburst. The possibility of having given Kelley a wrong impression of his father likewise made him uncomfortable. He might have spared himself that anxiety. Hastening to add a few words of mitigating explanation, he swiftly discovered that James J. had a thorough knowledge of the elder Stone's characteristic peculiarities.

"Needn't bother to tell me, son," the manager broke in. "I know old Bliss. The hit-and-run was always his great play, and everybody else had to foller his style. He wanted you to be a ball player, and you hadn't a word to say. When he butted up against a chunk of his own stubbornness, he didn't understand that you was a chip off the old block."

He lapsed into chuckling meditation, and Pebble, relieved, did not pursue the subject further. At least, he had kept to himself the secret of that other shock which, even more than his father's

sneers, had stung him to a resolution so utterly opposed to all his tastes and inclinations. The elder Stone's outburst seemed unjust and uncalled for; but, hardened as he was to that sort of thing, Gifford might have swallowed it along with other slights and sneers and lesser indignities had it not been for the bitter surprise of Hermia Meredith's unconscious self-revelation.

He had gone to her after that uncomfortable interview with his father, hurt, sore, and filled with a longing for a measure of the sympathetic understanding she always gave him; but from the very start it was evident that their moods were not in tune. His sense of ill usage deepened, and he drew back into his shell. Moved by that sheer perversity which makes one deliberately irritate fresh wounds, he presently turned the conversation to the subject he so detested, making the sarcastic statement that he thought of going out that summer for professional baseball. He was more than punished for the rather foolish impulse. For a minute she took him seriously, and in that brief space he seemed to get an illuminating glimpse of her mind which stung him to the quick. She really understood him no better than his father. Because he had never cared to waste his time upon baseball and other so-called athletic

sports, she also, thought him incapable of succeeding at them. He left the house, gripped by a stubborn rage; within him the vague impulse which had followed his father's harangue grew like a mushroom, and took possession of his soul.

It was this dominating purpose which keyed him to the accomplishment of an entirely distasteful task; as he progressed it seemed to strengthen and branch out instead of growing less. Further than refuting his father's sneers and proving to Hermia how utterly she had misjudged him, he realized as he sat thoughtfully silent beside Jim Kelley that he now had other motives for wishing to make good at baseball. He would show the Sluggers that he was as good a man as the best of them—and better. Monte Ward's gibes and sneers, seemingly unheeded at the time, had been stored away in a memory almost too retentive of slights. Even the ridicule of Johnny McElroy had not been forgotten by this imperturbable young man, who, among his other somewhat incongruous characteristics, possessed a good measure of the primeval, savage inability to forget an injury.

None of the Sluggers suspected this, but if they had it would have made no difference in their attitude toward Stone. They had sized him up as

being yellow, and when a man is once branded with that most unforgivable crime in the baseball decalogue life for him is certain to be far from one grand, sweet song. There were no more open insults such as had roused the newcomer's anger toward Buck Dyer, but the persistent ignoring of him both in the clubhouse and on the field was even harder for Stone to bear without a flare-up. His only satisfaction was in a constantly increasing efficiency on the diamond. With stubborn single-mindedness, he strained every effort, mental and physical, to accomplish plays which would sting and irritate his associates of the team. His almost uncanny mental agility gave him a decided handicap over the remainder of the infield. He seemed to know in advance just where a batter would hit, and he was continually scooping chances which did not belong to him. Before many days passed, he had roused the second and third baseman and the entire outfield to a state of resentful rage. This was not lessened when they found that appeals to Manager Kelley were quite fruitless.

"Oh, quit your beefing," admonished James J. "I ain't going to spoil a promising fielder by hampering him. If he wants to play all over the lot, and can pull it off, he can go to it. Instead

of putting up a howl, why don't you dopes show more speed yourselves?"

This made Stone still more unpopular, but he told himself that he was past caring what the men thought or said of him. He went his way, carrying out his plans with a taciturn steadfastness which never once lost sight of the goal he meant to gain.

"What do you think the little runt's doing nights?" sneered Pink Ziegler, as he arrived at the field one morning, about a week after Stone's début with the Sluggers.

There were a number of equally sneering answers, none of which seemed to hit the mark, for the second baseman shook his head. "Nothing like it," he declared. "He's picked up a couple of kids from the village, and every night right after supper they're out here at the park pegging to bases, fielding grounders, and all that sort of thing till dark. I s'pose the fool thinks he'll get a big drag with the chief working overtime, but he doesn't know Jim."

After that, many pointed references were made in Pebble's hearing to common "bootlickers" who tried to get themselves in soft with the management by such practices. Nevertheless, it might have been observed that, with the shortstop's

steady improvement on the diamond, such sneers became less frequent, finally ceasing altogether. They savored too much of sour grapes. Furthermore, the men were waking up to the fact that this newcomer was not the flash in the pan they had at first supposed him to be. Though he was not particularly popular with the crowd, some of the plays he pulled off were so spectacular that the applause came, swift and impulsive—the best and truest sort of appreciation.

When the new shortstop had been with the club two weeks, Manager Kelley could see a distinct improvement in the playing of the team. The men were getting started quicker, batting better, making fewer errors. James J. told himself that there was nothing like a little jealousy to keep a crowd of ball players on their tiptoes.

Kelley's scheme of cutting out the rough stuff and placing the game on a more scientific basis had not proved altogether a success. Although there was a noticeable change for the better, now and then at tense moments the Sluggers and their opponents reverted to the old snarling, rough-and-tumble methods of fighting for points. This was particularly true in contests with the Panthers. To Stone it was unsportsmanlike, and he came to look forward with disgust to their peri-

odic encounters with that particular club. This was not from any fear of personal damage. He was constantly on the lookout for trouble, which made it difficult to put over anything on him. But it annoyed him exceedingly to waste in this fashion mental and physical energy which would otherwise have gone into legitimate plays. Even though he did not realize it then, schooling of this nature was not wasted on him.

His irritation reached a climax in a game played nearly three weeks after he joined the team. The Panthers, sore on account of a losing streak, and egged on by the approval of the home fans, began early in the game with their rowdy tricks, which increased with each succeeding inning. Before long the Sluggers started to retaliate in kind. Several players on both sides were ruled off the field, and, though the seventh was reached without anything more serious happening, a sense of tension was apparent in both players and spectators.

As usual, Dyer's offensive manner and pugnacious retorts drew down upon his head a storm of invective from the bleacherites, as well as even more vicious signs of antagonism from the opposing players. The pitcher had kept himself fairly well in hand, however, and Stone felt that it was through sheer accident—though he could

not be absolutely sure—that Bunk Mullins, the Panther captain and second baseman, was spiked. Nevertheless, a riot ensued, which was quelled only when Dyer was sent to the bench and a substitute took his place.

The Sluggers lost the game by one score, and the atmosphere of the dressing room was blue as they changed to street clothes. Dressing swiftly, Gifford listened to the vitriolic comments with an unwonted feeling of agreement. The game should have been theirs—would have been but for the unfair forcing out of Dyer. Much as he disliked the man, Pebble was too fair-minded to belittle his skill on the mound. Naturally, however, in spite of that involuntary sense of being for the first time in accord with his teammates, the short-stop made no effort to join in the conversation. He strolled out of the room, leaving the discussion still raging. Pausing an instant at the door, he was wondering whether to wait about the grounds or make his way directly to the station, when Dyer's voice came clearly to him from the bedlam of sound.

"I'm going to run down to see Billy Hastings for a minute," he was saying. "Hold the train till I show up."

The pitcher appeared, passed Gifford without

a glance, and swung away toward the private entrance. Frowning, Stone followed slowly. No matter how indifferent he might be to the attitude of Dyer and the rest of the team, he had not yet been able to harden himself against the sting of such petty slights as this. They treated him as if there were something about his make-up which rendered him unfit to associate with them, and it angered him more than many a greater insult might have done.

He reached the gate, and his hand was already lifted to pull it open, when he stopped, listening to the muffled sounds which reached him over the high board fence. Suddenly, with a swift jerk, he yanked the gate open and stepped outside.

A knot of struggling, snarling men were massed in the roadway of the quiet side street, grappled so tightly together that Gifford stared, unable immediately to grasp the meaning of the extraordinary conflict. Panting, heaving, they apparently were not trying to fight one another, but were struggling to get at something or some one concealed in the midst of that close-pressed mass.

“Smash him, Bill!” urged a ruffian on the outskirts. “Beat him up for what he done to Bunk. Lemme git at ‘im!’”

Stone started forward. They were kicking a

man who was down. It was Dyer who lay at the bottom of that heap, the helpless victim of cowardly rowdies from the bleachers, seeking revenge for a fancied wrong. Taken unawares, probably felled by the first blow, the pitcher's boxing skill had availed him nothing. Twelve to one, at least! Pebble's blood boiled. The insults this man had flung at him poured back into his mind, a vivid, overwhelming flood, as he stood looking on in dumb amazement. Then a wave of shame swept over him for thinking of a personal grudge at such a time, and he leaped into the crowd of hoodlums with a shout like a battle cry.

CHAPTER XVI

THE TURN OF THE TIDE

IN the depths of a pit, black as Egypt's night, Stone heard a voice, faint and far away at first, but swiftly growing plainer and clearer as returning consciousness made him aware that he still lived after the crashing down upon his head of the heavens and all the stars.

“Game as they come, that's what he is,” the voice was saying. “I eat what I said about him being yellow. He tackled the whole bunch all by his lonesome; and fight—well, a dozen wild cats couldn't match him! He near had the gang breaking and running away when somebody hit him on the head with a rock. Then you boys sifted in just in time to save us both from being kicked into ribbons.”

Gifford recognized the voice as Dyer's even before he opened his eyes and discovered that his head was resting on Manager Kelley's knee. All around him were the faces of the Sluggers—friendly, sympathetic, anxious faces. The ruffians who formed the attacking party had van-

ished. Dyer, somewhat dusty and battered, did not appear to be seriously harmed.

"I—I thought—" mumbled Stone, trying to rise and feeling weak and giddy.

"I'm all right, kid, thanks to you," said the pitcher promptly. "You created a diversion so that I came through with just a few bruises; but for you they'd have left me stiff, I reckon."

To the surprise of all, the new player pushed aside helping hands and rose to his feet. His head was throbbing and buzzing, but he insisted that he was all right. "If I knew anything about fighting, I might have lasted a little longer," he said. "All I could do was butt in and hit right and left."

Dyer grinned. "Let me say that you sure have a wallop. You knocked down four men that I saw, and I was too busy to keep the score particular and careful. I've a notion you'd make a rather swift little scrapper, and if you want to learn the rudiments of handlin' your dukes I'll be glad to show you how much I don't know about fighting, myself."

Under the superficial banter of his tone, there was no mistaking his evident desire to make up for the past. For a moment Gifford hesitated, strongly inclined to turn down the pitcher's

friendly overtures and show them all how little he really cared for their good will. But all at once he realized that he did care. His attitude of cold indifference was nothing but a sham. He craved the intimate companionship, even the occasional horse-play, which enlivened the idle moments of the bushers. From all this he had hitherto been barred. If they were ready to lift the embargo he would be very foolish not to meet Dyer's advances at least halfway.

"Hope you're not making that offer because you think I won't take it up," he said, forcing a smile.

"No!" The pitcher's tone was emphatic. "I mean it."

"It's a bargain," said Stone. "But I hope you don't start this buzz planer going in my head every time you hit me." His fingers gingerly touched the place where he had been hit with the rock. "They added a beautiful bay window to my upper story, didn't they? Well, I'm satisfied to get off without having a skylight in my roof."

His eyes twinkled, and there was an infectious quality about his grin which brought responsive smiles to several faces.

"Mebbe he's a good lad, after all," commented Bull Johnson to a fellow player as the crowd

broke up and started for the station. "Anyhow, he ain't yellow. Buck knows he was wrong about that, now."

Before many days had passed, the big catcher's opinion became unanimous among the Sluggers. Relieved from the necessity of being constantly on the defensive, Stone came out astonishingly, betraying unexpectedly the possession of a sense of humor and a fertility of invention which speedily added much to the entertainment of the team. Little by little, as a quality is perfected with constant practice, the new shortstop's ready wit became sharpened. There was no taint of meanness in his fun; but his sense of the ludicrous was so strong that he never lost a point.

It was in verbal altercations with the Panthers, or the Brownies, or the Lakeville Reds, that Stone's talent blossomed to its fullest flower. In the midst of a snarling clash of contending voices, his cool, drawling tones would cut through the flow of vituperation with some pithy remark which almost invariably turned the laugh on one of the opposing players. If the latter attempted to answer back, he only plunged deeper into the morass of persiflage. Pebble was rarely at a loss. Several times he achieved the triumph of rousing, for an instant, a great roar of involuntary laugh-

ter from a man's own teammates. More than once he had reduced Monte Ward—whom he seemed especially to delight in harassing—to the point of apoplexy.

At first, various rougher methods of retaliating were attempted by the ball players, but here, also, they ran up against a solid wall. Stone never allowed his playing to digress from the line of clean, straight baseball, but he showed an ability to take care of himself on the diamond. A baseman who attempted to block the harmless-looking runner was quite likely to find himself inexplicably biting the dust. A husky Panther, seeking deliberately to spike the little shortstop, would suddenly recoil from the touch of the sharp brads into which he had run apparently with inexcusable awkwardness. There was no use appealing to the umpires. These officials, much as they might long to take sides with the injured one, were unable to point out a single movement of the agile shortstop which was not perfectly correct. There was a gradual lessening of these futile tricks, and soon they ceased altogether.

No one could have been more thankful for this than Pebble himself. He had found no enjoyment in the methods to which he had been driven for self-protection. The necessity of being con-

stantly on the alert for unfair attacks took much of his attention from the legitimate game.

His attitude toward baseball had not undergone any definite change. He still disliked the game as much as ever, but he was more than ever determined to make good. Knowing better than any one else how far he fell short of the standard he had set for himself, he grudged every moment that was not directed toward the desired end. And Kelley, watching critically from bench and coaching lines for flaws and limitations, took note of the improvement.

"He's the kind that climbs fast or blows up suddenly," the manager concluded. "I'd like to give him a boost, and I'll do it the minute I'm sure it won't do him more hurt than good."

As the summer progressed, with the Sluggers taking more and more of a lead in the Warren County League race, the veteran manager was having his own private little struggle to do what he considered the right thing. He could not blind himself to the fact that the team's increased efficiency was due in no small measure to the spur of the excellent playing of this unknown son of a famous father. Though Stone was by this time on good terms with the entire team, there still remained a spirit of friendly rivalry which

made the other men strain every effort to keep up with him—or as close as possible. He was, in short, a sort of pacemaker whom it was distinctly to Kelley's interest to hold as long as he possibly could. In addition, the manager had come more and more to like the boy personally; he wanted to have him about.

But it was the very fact that he had become so fond of Pebble, coupled with the memory of friendship for his father, which made it impossible for him to do the selfish thing and keep the young man where he was. Scarcely a day passed that did not see Kelley advising, criticizing, suggesting, giving freely out of the wealth of his experience in order that the infielder might more swiftly eliminate his faults and crudities and swing himself up the next rung of the ladder.

Toward the end of the season, when the time seemed ripe, the manager wrote and dispatched a brief epistle which resulted, a few days later, in the appearance in the grand stand of a short, stout stranger with nose glasses, who looked exactly like a jovial drummer. This person's interest was centered on one of the players, whom he watched closely.

The Sluggers were to play the Reds, who were pushing them fairly close in the final spurt for the

championship. Pebble, unconscious of anything special about the occasion, gave an average exhibition of his unusual talents. When he shot into Pink Ziegler's territory to scoop a difficult grounder, the stranger in the stand frowned slightly. Later, when the shortstop captured a hit which the left fielder should have taken, the fat man's disgust was patent. Even Stone's exceptional hitting did not cause the watcher to display enthusiasm.

At the conclusion of the game, the stranger descended upon the field and walked up to Kelley, who had lingered behind, as if expecting his approach.

"Well, how about it?" the manager demanded, in the perfunctory tone of one who already knows what the answer will be.

The rotund person's lip curled. "You're a good one," he retorted tartly, "trying to put that across on me!"

Kelley's jaw sagged and an expression of bewilderment overspread his countenance. "What!" he gasped. "You mean to say you ain't—going to take him?"

"Take nuthin'!" said the scout. "I'm jerry to you, Jim. You can't double cross me."

CHAPTER XVII

HIS REGULAR STYLE

FOR an instant the manager stared, frowning. Then his jaws closed with a snap, and his eyebrows straightened. But he did not lose his temper.

"You've got some kind of a bee buzzing round in your bonnet, Con," he said, "but I'm hanged if I know what it is. Suppose you let me have it straight. I never double-crossed a friend yet," he added, "and I reckon I'm too old to begin now."

The scout shrugged his plump shoulders doubtfully. "Do you mean to say, Jim," he asked, "that you didn't tell your players, both outfield and in, to hold back and let your shortstop make the play when he could reach it?"

"If I did," blurted James J., "I hope to be shot in my tracks! That's his reg'lar style, Con; he didn't do anything special to-day. I've let him go to it, for it sort of prods the others to work harder. When it comes to coverin' ground, he's a howlin' snowstorm—a reg'lar blizzard!"

The scout appeared incredulous. "I'll look him
over. I don't like his grandstanding, but
I suppose it was natural in a man who knew he
was being watched."

"He didn't know it," asserted Kelley promptly.
"If you think I put him wise, you're hitting be-
low the hundred mark. I never even whispered
to him. He pulls off that kind of stuff every day
of his life."

The scout continued doubtful and suspicious,
but James J. took him by the arm and conducted
him to the manager's private office, there to hand
him the official record of the Warren County
League games in which Stone had participated.
While this record credited the Sluggers shortstop
with a remarkable number of put outs and as-
sists, a little figuring revealed the surprising fact
that his fielding percentage was better than sixt-

"The figgers look pretty fair," admitted the
representative of a real-league manager, "and as
long's you swear you're giving me straight goods,
I'll take a chance on the boy. But if he turns out
to be solid ivory, don't ever call me down into
the pastures again to look at any of your prize
berries. Like the rest of 'em, I 'pose he thinks
he knows it all a'ready, and he'll have to have
that taken out of him to start with."

"You'll find him ready and eager to learn, and what he's told once he remembers."

"He's the kind that wants to play every instrument in the band, that's one thing ails him," criticized the visitor.

"That's just his way of trying to do his level best all the time," defended Kelley.

"A fine way to get the team as sore as crabs. Ain't you found it so?"

"Not to any disast'rous extent," said Kelley. "There was some growlin' at first, but I put the muzzle on, and it stopped. His example's been good for the others. Since I took him on the team has speeded up twenty per cent."

"That's interestin'," admitted the scout. "I'll tell the chief. Let's have Stone in and settle the business."

If Pebble was surprised at the proposition made him by the scout of the Badgers, he did not show it. He seemed as cool and unimpressed as if the Atlantic Coast League had been merely another bush organization of the caliber of the Sluggers. Having signed for no more than the present season with Kelley, he was in a position to drive a bargain with Stillman. This he proceeded to do in a most businesslike way. But after he had left the rough little office of the manager and

was crossing the empty field toward the gate, his freckled face expanded in a wide grin.

"Pretty soft," he told himself delightedly. "Think of being up against Johnny McElroy and his crowd next year! I was a joke for Johnny the first time we met, but if there's any baseball in me, maybe I'll do the laughing next!"

Even more gratifying, as he thoughtfully considered the advance, was the satisfaction of having taken another step toward the ultimate goal. He smiled grimly as he thought of his father; he thrilled with triumph as he recalled Hermia Meredith's regret and pity because of his inability to make good at just what he was doing now. He had no intention of taking either of them into his confidence yet, but the mere fact of having such a secret bottled up within him was the source of no little pleasure.

The season of the Warren County League ended on Labor Day in a blaze of glory for the Sluggers. When it came time for Pebble to pull up stakes and start for home, he found himself oddly reluctant to say good-by. There was little that was refined about his teammates of the bush. They murdered the king's English, scrapped on the least provocation, and at table several of them placed more dependence on the knife than is the

custom in polite society. Nevertheless, Stone was surprised and not a little puzzled by a sudden realization that he had formed an attachment for them. A few months ago he would have sworn such a thing impossible. Without his being aware of it, his views of baseball and of the men who made a business of playing the game were undergoing a change.

They shook his hand, thumped him on the back, told him they were black with envy, and wished him luck in the league higher up. Kelley poured a flood of advice into his listening ear.

Acting on the suggestion of Con Stillman, Gifford had arranged to stop off at the Badgers' home town for the purpose of meeting Manager Brody. It needed little persuasion to induce Buck Dyer, who was headed for New York to take up his winter work, to make the journey with him.

Early in the afternoon, the two alighted from the train and entered a lunch room for a bite to eat. It was too late to see Brody before the game, so they took a car out to the grounds, secured seats, and settled down to enjoy the pleasure of watching other people play ball.

To Stone, at least, this pleasure was vastly increased by the fact that the Badgers' opponent was none other than Johnny McElroy's Maroons.

With an odd amusement which held in it no trace of the irritation the man had formerly aroused in him, he watched the antics of the manager on the coaching line; but when the Maroons took the field, he turned his attention to the players, curious to see how the work of these men, which had impressed him so greatly at the beginning of the summer, would seem now, in the light of increased experience.

"They got a new lad on third," suddenly remarked Dyer. "Wonder who he is?"

Stone's glance shifted from the wiry Slats Ramsey at short to the tall, well-built third baseman who had just whipped the ball across the diamond with an easy, powerful swing. He caught his breath sharply, staring down at the man with an expression of amazed incredulity.

McElroy's new third baseman was none other than Chalmers Robinson, Stone's classmate, and his most dangerous rival for the favor of Hermia Meredith.

CHAPTER XVIII

WITH UNNECESSARY SWEETNESS

AT first Pebble could scarcely believe the evidence of his eyes, but swiftly he saw that there could be no doubt of the man's identity. He would have been more than human had he not presently felt a thrill of satisfaction at the realization that this fellow, who had always pretended to scorn professional athletics, was now doing precisely what he had so often cried out against. Immediately Stone wondered whether Robinson's appearance with the Maroons marked the date of his essaying the game as a paid player. Somehow, he had a conviction that it did not, and he was seized by a desire to learn how long Chalmers had been carrying on the deception. He resolved to find out.

It was during the eighth inning that he took Dyer into his confidence and sought his aid. "You see how it is, old man," he concluded. "I don't want him to know that I've been asking about him, so I can't very well brace Johnny Mack myself. You know McElroy, and you could look

him up after the game and find out all about it. While you're doing that, I'll settle with Brody, and we'll meet at the station."

The pitcher was willing to oblige him, and they separated just before the finish of the game. Taking care to avoid both McElroy and Robinson, Gifford sought the manager of the Badgers. When he reached the station, Dyer was waiting for him.

"That friend of yours strung you all right," Buck chuckled. "Mack dug him out of a jerk-water New Hampshire league about a month ago. Johnny's got him signed up for next season."

"But he is being paid now?" asked Pebble.

"Of course," was the emphatic reply. "He's been paid for the last two summers for playing on the Belton team of the White Mountain League —fifty a month this year and forty last. He's a fine piece of cheese to bawl out the profession, believe me!"

There was a grim smile on Pebble's lips as he led the way toward the train which was just pulling in. He had never liked Chalmers Robinson, and he felt no small satisfaction over the knowledge that the man was a hypocrite who masqueraded in false colors.

But presently the smile faded, as he thought of

Hermia and wondered how much she really cared for the fellow. She had no idea, of course, of the deception which lay beneath the attractive exterior, and Stone felt almost in duty bound to warn her. Swiftly, however, the impulse died. It would be impossible. She would think him moved by petty jealousy. She would refuse to believe the story; even if proofs were brought, she would probably reject them.

He parted with Dyer in the Grand Central, and took a car uptown. It was with not a little relief that he found his father away on a business trip. Physically altered as he was by a strenuous summer in the open, he could scarcely have hoped to escape comment and questions, and the elder Stone would never have been content by the vague explanations which satisfied the mother.

For the same reason, Pebble avoided most of his friends during the short time before college opened. But, as luck would have it, on his last day in the city, he ran into Laura Reid on the avenue. She was as vivacious as usual, and he remarked in her manner an exaggerated sweetness he had noticed at other times when she had something particularly disagreeable to impart.

In her gushing way, she wondered where he had been all summer to get so brown—so posi-

tively athletic looking. Had she known where to find him, she surely would have had him up at Mohassett while Hermia was there. Such a dear girl, and so popular! Of course he had heard about Chalmers Robinson and Hermia? Oh, yes, it was practically settled, although as yet there had been no announcement. It was merely a question of time.

She seemed bent on babbling on indefinitely, but Stone cut her short, almost rudely, and made his escape.

“Nice kitty; how soft your fur is!” he muttered as he fled. “Well, it’s certain they didn’t recognize me that day at Lakeville, or I’d have heard of it from her. It’s lucky I didn’t run into them again, with Mohassett not a dozen miles away.”

The meeting made him thankful he was taking the night train for Cumberland; another meeting with Miss Reid, he felt, would be more than he could stand.

He found the college apparently the same, but as the days passed he became slowly conscious of a difference. Formerly he had been content with his work and the mild relaxations of the small circle of congenial students—fellows who took the same course, were intensely interested in their

studies, and not at all averse to talking shop at any and all times. On his return, Stone expected to pick up the threads he had dropped in June; he was puzzled and disturbed when he discovered how difficult that was. Instead of finding pleasure in the old crowd, with their irregular meetings in one another's rooms and their serious discussions, he was bored.

He presently came to the conclusion that this uncomfortable restlessness must be due to the unusual nature of his summer's work, and the irresponsible character of the men with whom he had been associated. He told himself that he would surely get back into the old rut before long. But somehow he did not. Instead, as the crisp autumn weeks swept on toward chilly winter, he drifted slowly away from the old conditions.

He began making regular daily trips to the gym, where he spent hours in vigorous exercising. Unable to participate in the spring training of the Badgers, this was his only way to keep in shape; and he was determined not to start the coming season, more than a month late, under the handicap of poor physical condition. He kept up his boxing, too, partly because it was excellent exercise, but quite as much, it must be confessed, because of his inborn dislike for doing anything

halfway. He grew to enjoy the varsity football games, took long tramps, skated, played hockey, even dabbed in basket ball.

He made new friends—friends of a different type from those who had satisfied him his first three years of college. Some of these made fine showings in the classrooms; others did not. But each one possessed qualities of both mental and physical alertness, and the broadmindedness of men who do things. Pebble grew to like them very well indeed, and his feeling seemed to be reciprocated. Sometimes he was smitten by qualms for having quite deserted his former associates, but by the time Christmas vacation came round he was entirely off with the old and on with the new.

In all these weeks he had heard no word from Hermia Meredith, which was rather to be expected, considering the fact that he himself had not written. At first he had refrained from a sort of pique at her evident preference for the other man. As the months passed, it grew increasingly difficult to start the correspondence, until at last he told himself that he would wait till the midwinter recess and see with his own eyes how matters stood.

On the last day in the gym, the place was well

filled. After his exercise, he spent a lively half hour in the tank, with some of the swimmers; then, flushed and panting, his slim, well-knit body glowing from his exertions, he was scurrying through the dressing room when the gleam of something bright on the floor close beside the row of lockers halted him abruptly.

“Somebody’s getting careless in his old age,” he murmured, as he bent over and picked up a gold watch with a dangling ribbon and heavy fob attached.

He turned it over, looking for marks of identification. The case was bare of initial or monogram, the handsome fob unmarked. “Some kettle!” commented Pebble, as he snapped open the case. “If I had one as good as this—”

The words ceased with the abruptness of a cut telephone connection; for there was a photograph pasted carefully on the inside of the gold case—a girl’s photograph. And the eyes and the firm, sweet mouth were those of Hermia Meredith—Hermia, who had consistently scorned the type of girl who distributes her likeness carelessly broadcast.

“It’s all very well if a person’s actually engaged,” she had told him when he begged a year ago for the very picture from which this face had

been cut; "but I don't give them to anybody, Gifford, so you needn't feel hurt."

A rush of vivid color flooded the young man's face. There was only one inference to draw; only one man to whom the watch could possibly belong. As he realized how well it all fitted in with the conversation he had overheard weeks before, he was filled with a sudden childish longing to dash the costly thing of gold and delicate mechanism to the concrete floor. Then he saw Chalmers Robinson appear at the farther end of the long room and move slowly down the line of lockers, his eyes fixed searchingly on the floor.

Pebble snapped the watch case shut, struggled desperately for an instant for composure, and turned toward his successful rival. "Lost something?" he called in an elaborately casual tone.

Robinson glanced up quickly. "Yes, my watch. I must have dropped— You've found it!" His voice was full of relief as he stepped swiftly forward and took the article from Stone's outstretched hand. "Jove! I wouldn't have had anything happen to this for the world. Where'd you pick it up?"

"Here, half a second ago. I was just wondering whose it was. You ought to have your initials put on."

“I mean to. But it wasn’t so much the watch I was thinking of—” Robinson’s emphasis was faintly significant. His eyes were fixed intently on Stone’s face for a second before he thrust the watch into his fob pocket.

Stone finished dressing in gloomy abstraction. That evening he accepted an invitation—previously declined—to spend his vacation in Washington. The first week of the new year saw him back at Cumberland without having gone within two hundred miles of New York.

CHAPTER XIX

CHEER, WITH SPOTS OF GLOOM

GIFFORD passed rapidly through the various degrees of gloom usually experienced by a man who has been thrown down hard, starting with the stoic demeanor of an early Christian martyr and ending with the simulation of gay nonchalance calculated to hide—not entirely, of course, but just enough to contrast effectively with occasional periods of romantic melancholy—the fact of a broken heart. Not that his feeling for Hermia Meredith lacked depth; but youth is elastic, and Pebble was not the sort to brood long over an irremediable grief.

Those three weeks in Washington, with the constant succession of new sights and interests, helped astonishingly to soften the first bitterness. Before he had been at college a week all that remained of Stone's disappointment was a nagging little hurt whenever he thought of Hermia, and a strengthened determination to make a name for himself in organized baseball. It was, he felt—rather boyishly—his most effectual means of open-

ing Miss Meredith's eyes to the gravity of her mistake.

Though he made no conscious effort to avoid Chalmers Robinson, Pebble saw little of him during the winter term. The handsome chap traveled with a small, ultra-select, and decidedly sporty clique of seniors who had little use for the diversions of the common herd. Just how they employed their leisure moments was not accurately known, but there occasionally sifted through the student body rumors of midnight poker which made Pebble wonder how Robinson managed to hold up his end in a crowd noted for their wealthy parents and sinfully lavish allowances.

"Reckon he must always win," Stone concluded.
"He's the sort to do that, somehow."

But his associations did not prevent Robinson's prompt response to the first call for baseball material. To show up amidst the motley array of nervous underclassmen, tall, graceful, assured in his well-worn uniform with its magic "C" which he had carried triumphantly for two years; to catch the whispered comments of admiration or envy; to feel that every eye was watching his slightest movement—all this was sweet incense to his nostrils.

He loved, too, to be in the midst of a throng of

youngsters, who hung breathlessly upon his words. Stone, straying into the cage during one of the early days of indoor batting practice, came upon him holding forth to three or four sophomores on the sanctity of the amateur athlete and the low estate of the professional. It was a pet topic with Robinson—almost an obsession. Pebble paused now, his lips curling. A moment later he had the satisfaction of meeting Robinson's eye, and, with a meaning smile, passed on to watch the batting.

It was not the first time he had been drawn hither by a restless desire to see how things were going, and it was very far from easy to stand idly by when his fingers itched to close around a bat. The team this year was woefully short of good material. Gifford realized this from observation without the need of Jerry Crandall's constant lamentations. If only it were possible for him to play, he knew he could plug a big hole in the infield better than any one they had in view. He railed bitterly and with ever increasing vehemence against the unjust laws of amateur athletics which kept him tied hand and foot when his college needed him.

“A fellow can be a waiter, deck hand, or any other thing he feels like, to earn a little vacation

money," he mourned, "but he can't play ball. It doesn't seem a fair deal at all."

Once—it was after outdoor practice had commenced and the efficiency of the dwindling squad had aroused Stone to a high pitch of rebellion—he seriously asked himself why, after all, he shouldn't go out with the others. Plenty of college men did it every year without being found out. Robinson, for instance, was a living example that a man could be a professional for three years and yet preserve his amateur standing. And Robinson was working for personal glory, while Pebble thought only of the success of his college team. The chances were a hundred to one against any one's knowing of his summer work in New England. If he were not found out, what harm would be done?

But somehow he was not satisfied with these sophistries. Just or unjust, the rule regarding professionalism was plain and unequivocal, and honorable men were bound to abide by it. If Robinson chose to make of himself a living lie, that was his business; but he could not step down into the same class.

No doubt it would have been better had he kept away from the athletic field. There he was tormented watching the daily struggle made by cap-

tain and coach to lick the team into shape. Nearly every afternoon—sometimes alone, more often with his chum, Billy Trowbridge, or some other friend—he showed up during practice until he became almost as much of a fixture as the regular players.

“Since you’re so crazy about it,” remarked Trowbridge half jokingly one day shortly before the first regular game, “I don’t see why you don’t try for the team. Seems to me I have a vague recollection of your being on the freshman nine three years ago.”

Pebble grinned broadly. “Thank Heaven your recollection is vague. What I remember hurts like an ulcerated tooth. I played in just two games. In the last one, I enrolled my name on the tablet of fame, along with others, who have stolen second with the bases full. Selah!”

“A champion bonehead play!” Trowbridge laughed. “I gather that your interest here is more theoretical than practical, then.”

“Let it go at that,” agreed the other. “It sounds well, whatever it means. Anyhow, I hate to think of the old college being done brown on both sides, like a fried egg. There’s a leak somewhere in the gas pipes,” he added, with his eyes fixed on Chalmers Robinson.

Robinson was orating, in his usual fashion, on the recent public exposure and downfall of a prominent amateur athlete with a semi-professional past. Trowbridge listened amusedly for a moment, and then raised his eyebrows.

"I suppose what he says is all true enough," he remarked; "but he certainly has a little-tin-god-on-wheels way of saying it. Well, I must beat it. By-bye."

Left alone, Stone stood there, his lips curling. "Robinson," he called, "look here a minute."

Astonished, the man addressed turned and stared indignantly at the person who had summoned him so peremptorily. For an instant, it seemed as if he meant to snap out a sarcastic refusal; but something in Gifford's face must have stirred his curiosity, for he shrugged his shoulders and lounged languidly over.

"Well, what do you want of me?" he inquired disagreeably.

"Not much," answered the young man. "I thought I'd give you a bit of advice. I've heard you blowing a lot about professional athletics lately. If I were in your place, I'd quit."

CHAPTER XX

▲ TRY FOR HOME

A FLAME of angry crimson leaped into Robinson's face, and his eyes narrowed. "You blamed little runt!" he rasped furiously. "What do you mean by that?"

Gifford smiled pleasantly. "Johnny McElroy's Maroons are a pretty fast little bunch of ball players, aren't they?" he remarked suavely. "I happen to know Johnny. I know about the new third baseman he brought from the White Mountain League in August. Do you get me?"

Evidently Robinson did. He turned white, then crimson, and finally a pale, unhealthy gray. His air of pompous self-sufficiency vanished as swiftly as the gas from an exploded balloon. He looked wilted. Finally he moistened his dry lips nervously and shot a furtive glance at Gifford.

"You're not—going to—put them wise?" he asked in a low, uneven voice.

"No," returned Pebble contemptuously. "Perhaps I ought. Anyway, I can't stand any more of your driveling hypocrisy. Cut it out."

He turned away abruptly, missing the glare of impotent fury cast after him by the crestfallen man he had humiliated. The satisfaction of taking the wind out of his rival's sails had put him in good humor. He joked with Bob Crosby, the varsity full back, who was as interested as himself in the baseball situation, chaffed several other onlookers, and finally ended by volunteering to fungo flies for the squad.

It was something he had hitherto refrained from doing. He had a suspicion that, once he got a bat in his hands, he would forget caution and give himself away. While he was not in the least ashamed of his summer occupation, he saw no reason why it should become the subject of public comment and criticism.

There was something exhilarating in the mere heft of the bat and the strong, choppy swing with which he drove the ball whistling into the out-field. Before he had been at it five minutes, he completely lost himself in the sheer pleasure of this absurdly simple act. He was unconscious of surprised glances and whispered comments, when, now and then, he deftly caught the ball with one hand; and once he could not resist the desire to line it down to second, which he did with accurate ease that was in itself a betrayal.

Crandall's voice, announcing the end of practice for the day, brought him at last to earth, and he caught the captain's questioning glance fixed upon him.

"Now the soup's on the tablecloth!" he thought, as he slid into his coat and moved rapidly away. "If they get after me, I may be compelled to own up I can't come out because I'm a professional."

He fairly flew from the field, purposely deaf to a shout or two from behind. He made straight for his room in the dormitory. He wanted a few minutes to collect himself. They would be down on him when they knew. It was really a shame that a man in his position, who did not need to play ball for money, should have made himself a professional when the team needed him so badly.

"But I had a reason," he reminded himself as he ran up the stairs and flung open the door of his room. "I'd never—"

He stopped abruptly, his eyes widening. A square, broad-shouldered, florid man of fifty odd stood frowning out of the window, one hand in his pocket jingling keys and silver with a vehemence which suggested extreme impatience. He looked round sharply.

“Why—father!” stammered Gifford. “I had no idea— Is anything the matter?”

“Matter?” repeated the older man tartly. “What wouldn’t be the matter? I’ve been cooling my heels in this hole a good hour waiting for you to come in. Your mother’s down at the hotel. Nothing would do but she must break the trip to Chicago by stopping off here—as a *surprise!*” He emphasized the word queerly. “That comes of your piking off to Washington instead of coming home, where you belong. Well, don’t you understand me? Perhaps I’d better formally extend an invitation to dine at the hotel and spend the evening.”

“Not necessary, sir,” his son assured him quietly. “It won’t take me five minutes to change. If you don’t want to wait, I’ll come along later.”

Beyond an added touch of color and a slight tightening of his lips, he seemed oblivious to the verbal assault. He was used to this sort of thing, particularly when his father’s notoriously short temper had been at all tried. Although he accepted it all with outward indifference, not even custom had sufficed to banish a feeling of indignant protest against the older man’s frequently unjust treatment of his only son.

"Huh!" grunted Bliss Stone. "If you won't be more than five minutes, I'll wait."

He turned back to the window. For a few moments the silence was unbroken save by the sounds made by the younger man as he rapidly changed his clothes. "Still keen to break into the sawbones game, I s'pose?" suddenly remarked the elder man in a tone which left no doubt as to his complete contempt for his son's chosen profession.

"Yes, sir."

"Huh!" The keys jangled. "Any man can be a doctor if he has a nice, ladylike bedside manner. Well, come in."

Firing forth the invitation, he turned and saw the door open to reveal a brawny youth who hesitated awkwardly at the unexpected sight of this bristling stranger. "Come in, Bob," invited Pebble in an ominously quiet voice. "Let me introduce my father."

The two shook hands perfunctorily, old Blister's eyes resting with some approval on the student's wide shoulders. Crosby turned hastily to his friend. "I didn't know there was any one here," he said apologetically. "I won't bother you now. I came in to— Well, you've simply got to try for the team, Giff."

“Team!” blurted Bliss Stone, his eyes opening wide. “What team?”

Bob Crosby’s eyebrows went up. “Why, the baseball team, Mr. Stone—the varsity.”

The older man laughed sardonically. “The baseball team! That’s rich! You after my son to try for the varsity ball team? How long have you known him? He can’t play baseball or any other man’s game, and he won’t try, either. I’m sorry to say it, but he lacks—”

“I beg pardon, father; we’re keeping Crosby,” suddenly cut in Gifford in a voice which made his elder stare at him. “He’s in a hurry to get away.”

The football player looked relieved. With a hurried word or two about seeing his friend soon, he was thankful to escape from the embarrassing situation. Closing the door deliberately, Gifford turned around, his face white. There was a strange look in his eyes.

“Well,” he said slowly in a voice which shook a little, “permit me to compliment you on the promptness with which you found an opportunity to humiliate me.”

Never before had Gifford spoken to his father in that tone. Bliss Stone gasped, and his florid face turned redder. “You? Did I say anything

that wasn't true!" he exploded, when he recovered.

The younger man faced his father unflinchingly. "Because I've never had any use for baseball, do you think I lack the brains and ability to play it?" he asked. "Wait a minute!"

He crossed the room to his desk, fumbled for an instant in a pigeonhole, and brought out a long envelope. From this he twitched a folded sheet of paper, shook it open, and, as he returned, thrust it into his father's hands. The angry man read it, scowling. Then he raised his head swiftly.

"What's this?" he rasped.

"I didn't mean to let you in on it," said his son quietly, "until I'd gone up another round on the ladder, but, since you've forced part of it from me, you may as well have it all. For years you've been throwing it in my teeth that I hadn't the brains or nerve to play even bush baseball. Finally it became a little more than I could stand. Just to show you what a cinch it was, I went down in the far away sticks last June and got a job as shortstop from an old friend of yours named Kelley."

"Old Jim Kelley!" gasped the elder Stone in a queer voice.

"The same man."

"Tell me about it," requested the father in the same husky tones.

Pebble recounted his experiences briefly, and ended them abruptly, startled by the extraordinary transformation in his father's face. First he stared as if doubting what he heard; then there flashed into his face an expression of gladness that made the young man tingle uncomfortably; for there came to Gifford suddenly a clear understanding of his father which all those years had failed to bring. "I didn't know you cared as much as that, dad," he muttered awkwardly.

Old Blister blinked. Suddenly shooting out one hand, he gripped his son's shoulder. "But can you make good, boy?" he demanded with almost fierce anxiety. "Can you make a hit with the minors—and then go higher?"

Gifford smiled. "I don't know," he answered. For an instant the sudden squaring of his jaw gave his more delicate face an odd resemblance to the man opposite him. "But I'm going to make one almighty hard try for a home run."

CHAPTER XXI

AMID STRAPPED TRUNKS

THAT evening Gifford had to tell the story of his summer's experiences over and over, the elder man asking a thousand questions, and chuckling heartily as he listened to the rehearsal of the young man's adventures in the bush. In his son, Blister was practically living over again his own early days at the game which he considered by far the greatest ever devised by man.

He was bluff, jovial, enthusiastic, human; and once or twice the youth sighed a little at the thought of those wasted years of strife and antagonism. There was just one fly in the amber: though the older man did his best to hide it beneath an outward show of confidence, Pebble could see that in reality he was harassed by a doubt of his son's ability to make good, even with the minors.

"I suppose you can't blame him, at that," thought young Stone, as he walked slowly back to his room. "He don't really know a thing about

my playing, except what I've told him. Still, I wish he had a little more confidence in me."

Nevertheless, the knowledge that such a doubt existed increased the incentive to make good. To fail now would mean the utter dashing of the high expectations he had raised in his father's mind; perhaps it would seriously mar the friendly relations between them which he had found so pleasant.

Failure was more than merely possible. Fortunately, unlike many men who make rapid progress in the game, Gifford was not inclined to fancy that he already knew all there was to learn. Also, fortunately, he had read in a magazine the story of a big leaguer who, through conceit, had met with many reverses and setbacks in his climb from obscurity to the majors; and he had taken that lesson to heart, forming a resolution not to hurt his own chances by getting a swelled head.

With so much to learn, he felt that he should be making the most of every hour. He chafed under the necessity of waiting for commencement and his degree, which all at once had become of such minor importance in his scheme of things. He even considered cutting the Gordian knot by leaving college at once. But saner daylight reason showed him the folly of such a step.

The necessity of making known that he was a professional athlete seemed of small importance. When Crosby spoke to him, soon after breakfast, he imparted the information casually, and listened with composure to the other's dismayed comments. Of course the news spread, and he was somewhat annoyed at the general criticism of what he considered purely a personal matter. Nevertheless, this was easily tolerated when he realized that, while he might not play on the varsity, he was free to go out with the scrub and throw himself heart and soul into the business of getting all the baseball practice possible. The scrub welcomed him with open arms.

As April merged into May, and the spring weeks crept slowly on, the result of that practice became apparent, even to himself. He would reach the Badgers, perhaps not in as good condition as the men who had been playing real ball for six weeks, but in infinitely better shape than he had hoped for two months ago.

Letters began to arrive from Joe Brody, each one more insistent than the last, urging him to lose no time in joining the club. The veteran shortstop was beginning to show signs of giving way under the strain, and the manager was anxious to lay hands on his new recruit in time to

knock him into shape before the other blew up completely.

The instant the last grilling test of examination week was over, Gifford packed up and made ready to leave by the early-morning train. If he had passed the exams—and he felt fairly confident that he had—his degree was his without the necessity of waiting for commencement. It was a pity, perhaps, to forego it, but another week's delay seemed unbearable.

In all this time he had told no one save Billy Trowbridge of his summer plans or of the contract with the Badgers. Billy was quite safe, and he was intensely interested in his chum's future. Often, as on that last evening in the dismantled room, amid strapped trunks and nailed-up packing boxes, they had talked it over. To Trowbridge the incongruity of it all never seemed to lose its perennial freshness.

“It still gets me,” he confessed that night, sprawling across the bed while Stone stowed away a last few belongings in his suit case. “To think of a chap grinding away as you've done at something he dislikes, putting himself where you are, simply because he's set his stubborn mind on showing ‘dad’! Are you quite sure, old man, that you do hate it as much as you did at first?”

Pebble straightened up. His lips had parted for a ready affirmative, but slowly they closed in silence. A faint wrinkle dodged into his forehead. Oddly enough, he had not asked himself that question for months. He had taken the answer for granted. He had even been a little proud of the indomitable will and strength of character which had brought him this measure of success against his real inclination. But did he hate baseball? He remembered the queer restlessness that had driven him to haunt the cage and, afterward, the baseball field. He thought of those weeks of laborious practice and the almost feverish anxiety to cut college and join his team. There had been no sense of hardship in any of this, but rather the keen enthusiasm which comes when one's heart is in one's work.

The discovery was a real shock; it was difficult for him to adjust his mind to this new conception. Few people are ready instantly to acknowledge the complete upsetting of a cherished point of view. He flushed a little, and smiled with faint embarrassment.

"Oh, well, not so much as at first, perhaps," he admitted. "I suppose, in a way, baseball is a pretty decent little old game."

CHAPTER XXII

UNDER MAROON FIRE

SHORTLY before six the next afternoon, Gifford leaped from an open car and began to push his way through the crowd that was pouring out of the ball park. It was a noisy throng, and he did not have to strain his ears to learn that the Badgers had just lost the first game of a series with the Maroons—lost it, too, by a swamping score.

“The old fossil oughta been sent to the scrap heap years ago,” declared one indignant fan. “I says so last season, but Brody hangs on to him, an’ now see what he’s gone an’ done.”

“Tossed off a game just when we needed it the worst way!” bitterly agreed his companion.

Pebble paused, alert and curious. “Say, Jack,” he asked abruptly, “who’s that you’re talking about? I didn’t see the game.”

The two young fellows stared. “Who?” growled one, after sizing up the inquirer. “Why, that has-been at short, of course. All the

baseball he ever had's ran outa him. Threw the game away twice."

Gifford nodded his thanks and passed on. So it had come at last; Pennock had succumbed to the strain. Likely at this very moment Brody was raging about the recruit whose delayed appearance was in a way responsible for the disaster.

"Well," thought the new player, as he reached the gate, which had been obligingly pointed out by some youthful hangers-on, "it's lucky I didn't stay for commencement." His passage was barred by the pompous guardian of the portal, but he showed that he was in no mood for delay. "My name's Stone," he cut in on the other's remarks. "Where's Brody?"

With a surprised grunt, the man slammed the gate shut, grabbed the young man by the elbow, and hurried him round a corner to the clubhouse entrance. "The chief's in there," he informed him in a cautious tone, pointing to a partly closed door.

"Snyder!" suddenly bawled a voice from within the room.

The gatekeeper ducked and disappeared in a flash. The door was jerked open, revealing the lank figure of the Badgers' manager, still partially

clad in the club uniform he invariably wore, though memory did not extend back to the time when he had actually taken part in a game. His thatch of graying hair stood on end; his lean face was set in a scowl that deepened for an instant as he caught sight of his visitor, but vanished abruptly before the rush of surprised recognition.

"Suffering Moses!" he ejaculated. "You're here at last, are you? It's time! I was getting ready to burn up the wires between here and Cumberland. Come in!"

The manager's relief at the sight of his much-needed shortstop was so apparent that Pebble smiled to himself as he entered the small office and took a seat.

"I cut the last week and hustled here the minute exams were over," he explained. "You know our contract specified that I didn't have to show up till the twelfth of June."

"Huh!" grunted Brody, to whom exams and college degrees were of small moment compared with the needs of his ball team. "I was a fool to stick in such a clause. Pennock's gone to smash, and I s'pose it's going to take you a week or more to speed up to the right notch so's you can play real ball."

"I'm ready to go in to-morrow if you need me," Stone stated quietly. "I wrote you a while back that I was working every day, and I've kept it up."

Brody was skeptical. While he dressed, he asked many questions concerning the amount and quality of the recruit's practicing. "College base-ball ain't the real thing, anyhow," he observed at last, "though what you've been doin' was prob'ly better'n nothing. We'll see how you show up in the morning. Come in and meet the bunch."

The members of the team were gathered in the locker room in various stages of undress. Gloom pervaded the assemblage, and there was no perceptible lightening as Gifford was presented. They were all polite enough; there was none of the crudeness of the Sluggers. But somehow, by subtle shades of manner and expression, they gave the new arrival the impression that they blamed him for the recent defeat which had so dashed their spirits.

One of them particularly appealed to Pebble. He was tall, clean-limbed, and rather handsome. He had hair the color of old Domingo mahogany, straightforward gray eyes, and a noticeable reserve of manner. He was Christopher King, the regular backstop, familiarly known as "Brick."

Stone was surprised as well as pleased next morning to have King stroll over, as he was arraying himself for practice, and they exchanged a few casual remarks.

On his mettle, Stone worked like a Trojan, and acquitted himself well. Brody's comments were brief, but it was evident that the manager had been agreeably surprised.

Back in the clubhouse most of the players thawed noticeably. Only one of them seemed openly disposed to patronize the new man. This was Curly Griffith, a member of the infield, who had been farmed out to Brody by the manager of the famous Blue Stockings. There was every probability that another spring would see him back in the Big League training camp, with added experience and a fine chance to make good.

"Which accounts for his being a little lofty toward a raw busher like me," said Pebble to King, who had given him the information. "I'd like to be in his shoes myself."

As the moment approached for his second appearance on the professional baseball stage, the new recruit was conscious of a growing nervousness. He couldn't help being a little anxious and wishing the ordeal was over. Knowing as he did the brand of baseball furnished in this league, he

wasn't at all sure that his own efforts would measure up to it. But the thought of Johnny McElroy and the surprise in store for that jocular person cheered him. When he finally left the clubhouse with the rest of the team, and jogged across the field toward the diamond, he had ceased to consider the possibility of failure, and was looking forward with keen delight to the imminent encounter with the manager of the Maroons.

The latter chanced to be deep in conversation with some of his men, and seemed oblivious to Pebble's presence during the Badgers' period of snappy practice. As he came in from the field, Stone purposely strolled slowly past, and was rewarded by an astonished stare from the lively McElroy.

"Well, well, well!" exclaimed that irrepressible person. "My old college chum, dinged if it ain't! Are you traveling with Joe as a mascot or bat boy? That's one way of getting with a real ball team."

Pebble grinned. "Guess again," he said. "I'm the real, original, triple-action jinx for your crowd. You haven't a chance in the world while I'm around."

It took McElroy only a few minutes to ascertain Stone's status with the Badgers, and he at once

set about avenging the blow struck at his most delicate sensibilities. Gifford had scarcely left the bench to take the field with the rest of the team when a chorus of sarcastic comments arose from the Maroons:

“Pipe the new kid at short! It’s that same Willie off the pickle boat!”

“He’s going to show us how real ‘rah-rah’ boys play the game.”

“Hold up your chin, little man. It won’t hurt you much, and it’ll be all over in a few minutes.”

They were after Pebble’s goat, and he knew it. Though he flushed a little under this fire, he took it with seeming composure. He was sensible enough to make no effort at retaliation. To talk back now, before he had shown the crowd what he could do, would be fatal. So he held his peace, praying for a chance to turn the tables on his tormentors.

Banty Kerrigan, the Badger pitcher, opened up with a fine line of samples. In the first inning, only one Maroon got a good crack at the horse-hide, sending a long fly into right field, where it was promptly gathered in by Skeets McCarter, another farmed-out product of the Big League.

Stone was fifth on the batting order, following Griffith, and when he appeared to select his stick,

the Maroon cohorts resumed the attack with refreshed ardor. The superior first baseman fouled out to third, and Gifford stepped to the pan with two down and men on second and third.

It was not the first time he had faced the Maroons' long and lanky twirler. As his eyes met those of Moose Conroy, who had been unctuously delivering more than his share of taunts, he remembered that other day a year ago when he had spoiled eleven of this pitcher's good ones in succession. He took a fresh grip on his bat and gave Moose a significant smile.

CHAPTER XXIII

GETTING BACK AT JOHNNY

IT was soon evident that Conroy, as well as Stone, remembered the day when the latter had given his remarkable exhibition. But as he toed the rubber the long, narrow, homely face which had given him his nickname lost the wide grin it had worn and became intent and serious. His eyes sought Pebble's speculatively for an instant before his arm whipped forward and the ball whirled from his fingers to clip a corner of the plate.

"Stra-a-ake!" bawled the umpire, with an upward jerk of his thumb.

Conroy had outguessed the batter. Gifford acknowledged it without attempting self-excuse. He was deaf to the jeering comment which came in waves from all over the diamond. As he waited, his mind flashed swiftly over the pitcher's repertoire of a year ago. The most prized of all, as he remembered vividly, was a swift inshoot, shoulder high. Would Conroy try that now? He

thought it likely, but still he waited, ready for anything.

Yet "Moose" fooled him again. Pebble had allowed for everything save the possibility of Conroy's having added to his bag of tricks. A year ago the Maroon pitcher had been apparently incapable of throwing a sharp drop, for he had previously hurt his arm with too much drop pitching; so when the sphere came whizzing straight for the plate, the batter took it to be a swift one in the groove or else a ball breaking but slightly. He struck over it.

"Can't even spoil the good ones!" whooped McElroy derisively. "Both eyes buttoned up!"

Stone held fast to his faith in himself. He could hit Conroy, and nothing should make him doubt it. From under his drooping lids he watched the man like a hawk. Most pitchers having so much to spare would put over a coaxer or two, but something told him that Moose would know he was expecting that, and was quite as likely to try to end the contest by slipping over a third strike.

This time the batter's judgment was correct. Conroy dealt out another drop; but the new infielder of the Badgers stepped into it, bringing his bat round with a snappy swing which caught the horsehide before it had fairly begun to break, and

drove it out on a line between left and center.

Even before reaching first, the added volume of sound from the stands told Pebble that one man had scored. Urged on by the coacher, he rounded the corner and tore down the base line at a speed which made Joe Brody's eyes widen with pleased surprise. It was a pretty two-bagger, a triple which only a base runner of the Ty Cobb pattern could make; but Stone crossed second, apparently with increasing speed, and stretched himself for third.

A well-known expert has divided baseball players into two broad classifications: Those who take chances, and those who play it safe. Gifford believed in the former method. If there was a ghost of a chance to make a play, he took it, and so accurately were brain and body attuned that he never lost a fraction of a second in making up his mind. Slow thinking and hesitation in baseball are fatal, and he knew it. Had he faltered, the ball would have beaten him to the sack; as it was, a perfect hook slide saved him by a small margin which satisfied the umpire that he was safe.

The crowd acclaimed his performance with roars of approval.

Panting a little, but with a grin on his freckled face, he scrambled up and slapped the dust from



Stone crossed second, apparently with increasing speed, and
stretched himself for third.

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his person. His roving eyes found Johnny McElroy standing near the bench, uncommonly silent. The grin widened. "How was that for a fall-away, Mack?" he inquired pleasantly. "Much obliged to you for showing me the trick."

The manager's retort was rather weak. Like the majority of jokers, Johnny was prone to squirm when the shoe was on the other foot. He was still further annoyed when Rube Saltus, who followed Stone, smashed the sphere at the Maroon second baseman, who fumbled and threw wild, letting in the third run within as many minutes.

In the next inning Gifford made a great one-handed stop of a smash which by every right should have been a hit. A little later he assisted in a double play that retired the Maroons with disconcerting abruptness. Then he started in to get even.

Lightly, delicately, but with almost diabolical insight, he went after each member of the opposing team. His remarks got under the skin like little barbed darts, to sting and fester. A batting slump, a fielding weakness—anything and everything was capital for his active brain. His own teammates were soon convulsed with laughter. The fans, after their fashion of shifting sides at a moment's notice, turned the battery of their mirth

upon the visitors. The latter did their level best to retaliate, but the odds were against them. Annoyance gave place to anger, and anger is not conducive to brilliant baseball. In spite of several attempts to rally, they played more and more erratically, and finally lost the contest by even greater odds than they had won the game the day before.

“The jinx worked, didn’t it?” said Gifford pleasantly, as he overtook the irate McElroy on his way to the clubhouse.

Johnny glared. “Jinx be blowed!” he snapped. “You’re worse than a whole flock of mosquitoes. If I’d known what a pest you were, hanged if I wouldn’t have grabbed you up last year and put you under contract just for the sake of having that tongue of yours on the right side!”

CHAPTER XXIV

CAPRICE OF FORTUNE

PEBBLE'S standing with the Badgers was assured. He had shown his ability to fill one of the most difficult positions on the team, and the manner in which he came back at the Maroons and Johnny McElroy, melted the thin ice of reserve that had greeted his arrival. Almost without exception his associates unbent, and before a week had passed the new shortstop felt as if he had belonged to the team for years.

Rube Saltus and Steve Howell still maintained a frosty demeanor, and complained frequently and with increasing bitterness to Brody of the way the shortstop was constantly poaching on their preserves, and taking plays which rightfully belonged to them. For a while the manager tolerated these outbursts. He was carefully studying the new player's methods and rather expecting the eccentric fielder to come a cropper. But somehow Stone avoided this. Considering the chances he took, his error percentage was astonishingly small, and gradually it dawned upon Brody that an at-

tempt to curb the youngster might disastrously upset his form. So, like Kelley of the bush team, he curtly advised the grumbling basemen to speed up a bit if they wanted to stay in the running. Then he proceeded to devote much of his energy to correcting certain other faults of his latest acquisition.

Gifford took kindly enough to the process. He was no more in love with personal criticism than the average man, but in this case he knew Brody was right. He realized that the sooner his crudities were polished and his faults eliminated, the sooner would he attract the attention of the Big League scouts.

As the weeks passed, this idea gradually became a mild sort of obsession. Despite the improbability of such a thing, he hoped that this very season might bring about what he so keenly craved. Nothing could stunt his sense of humor or still the flow of quick-witted persiflage which delighted the fans and soon made him a prime favorite—that was as natural as breathing itself; but underneath the frothy surface of frivolity a keen and active brain was constantly working to seize and utilize every possible help to the desired goal.

When Chalmers Robinson joined the Maroons,

a rivalry swiftly sprang up between the two which was an added incentive to Stone to make good. Whatever his standard of honor might be, Robinson certainly could play ball, and Pebble had to admit it, much as it hurt him. Freed from the restraint of a bush team and stimulated by the atmosphere about him, Robinson blossomed into a superb example of that second type of ball player—the man who plays safe. He never sought to steal a base unless the odds were in his favor or unless ordered to do so; never tried to stop a ball when a muff would bring disaster. He never, in short, took long chances. Yet he had a clever way of holding himself back without appearing to do so, and when he avoided taking a desperate chance it always seemed unlikely that another man could have made the play. He accomplished what he tried to do nine times out of ten, and his error column was a barren waste which turned Gifford green with envy whenever he was moved to inspect it.

He could not escape the growing conviction that the man he secretly disdained was proving himself the better ball player. Though there had been a distinct toning down and lessening of flukes in the shortstop's work, he was still painfully conscious of vast room for improvement. Some-

times he despaired of ever entirely correcting his faults. Perhaps he wasn't cut out for the majors, after all; perhaps he was one of those men with a limit beyond which they cannot rise; perhaps he had set his goal too high.

Such moments of depression were never long enduring, but they continued to occur as the summer crept along toward autumn, and the scouts—save those who dropped in now and then paternally to follow the progress of Griffith and McCarter—avoided the Badgers with chill persistency.

When the news came in mid-August that Robinson had been secured by the Dodgers, Pebble's spirits dropped to zero and remained at that depressing level until a rush of hot rage at his puerile lack of staying power sent them back to normal. "You cowardly lump of misery!" he fiercely apostrophized himself. "You've got about as much nerve as a guinea pig. What if he has got the boost? The Dodgers are only tail-enders in the Big League, anyhow."

Nevertheless, it was not easy to behold with equanimity the airs and graces assumed by his rival. Chalmers—"Classy" they had begun to call him—seemed to take malicious delight in rubbing it into the other man. The latter's retorts

usually turned the laugh on his antagonist, but the little shortstop was the only one who knew how hard it was to keep up his air of nonchalant indifference. Nevertheless, he forced himself to believe that his chance would also come, though as the season waned such a possibility seemed more and more unlikely.

It was an unfortunate year for the Badgers. Brody's twirling staff failed him toward the finish, and, with a crippled bunch of pitchers, the most desperate efforts of the rest of the team could not prevent the Pink Sox from acquiring a lead that cinched the pennant. However, Brody had the doubtful satisfaction of knowing that Johnny McElroy was in the same boat. The final week of the season saw the Badgers and the Maroons battling for second place with a fierceness which even the hope of a pennant could hardly have intensified.

The Badgers won the first game of the series by a hair. It was five minutes before the starting time of the second when Chalmers Robinson strolled up to Stone, a smirk of malicious satisfaction on his face. "Still waiting around for a Big League offer, I see," he said.

"You ought to hire a window cleaner!" retorted Gifford airily, though he felt like punching

the man. "I'm laying low so the second-division scouts won't gobble me up."

"Don't worry too much over that," advised Robinson, his lips curling. "Maybe it'll interest you to know that one of Ben Frazer's scouts has come up to-day to look Slats over."

Pebble's grin, a miracle of effectiveness, was one of the hardest he had ever pulled. "Frazer, of the Wolves!" he exclaimed. "Why, they're trailers—almost as near the bottom as the White Wings. I must try to keep out of sight." He maintained his careless air until Robinson departed, palpably disappointed by his apparent failure to disturb Pebble.

Had Stone been a model youth, he doubtless would have viewed with self-sacrificing pleasure the admirable showing made by his successful rival in the game that day. Slat's single dumb play should have filled him with a generous regret; his hair-raising catches, surprising stops, and fair batting should have aroused a corresponding enthusiasm; but Pebble could not keep his thoughts from dwelling on his own lack of success.

Unconsciously, perhaps, with such an example before him, he played rather brilliantly himself. But when the game was over and he disconsolately sought the clubhouse, he was obliged grudgingly

to admit that Ramsey had made a very decent showing. His spirits failed to rally as they usually did. After slaving for three long months with a single absorbing purpose in view, it was hard to realize that his last chance was gone for the present season.

"It means another year with the minors!" he growled to himself. Then a wry smile twisted his lips. "I can hear Bliss Stone roar."

A shower, a rubdown, and a good dinner worked wonders. When he emerged from the hotel dining-room that evening, his grouch had taken wings, and he was his old, philosophical self once more. Anyway, he thought comfortably, they had beaten the Maroons two straight, and one more victory would put them in second place. Then he caught Joe Brody's signal, and crossed the lobby. "Let me present you to Mr. Smithson, Peb," said the manager.

The shortstop shook hands, wondering where Joe had picked up the insignificant-appearing man who looked as if he wouldn't know the difference between a home run and a foul tip. As if he read the shortstop's thoughts, Brody grinned.

"Come to life, kid!" he said. "Smithson is a scout for Frazer, of the Wolves. He's taken a fancy to you, and wants to steal you off'n me."

CHAPTER XXV

HARD TO BELIEVE

GIFFORD stared at Brody in stunned silence. After a moment, his glance shifted to the clean-shaven face of the stranger, faintly pink, and wrinkled like a wintered apple. There was a great pounding in his brain, caused by the beating of his own heart. "You want *me*?" he stammered, at length. "Why, I thought—" He turned to Brody. "Is this a joke?"

"If it is," said Smithson, "I hope the laugh isn't on me. I came up to watch Ramsey in action; but I happen to prefer taking a chance with you, that's all."

"Now, don't swell up and bust," cut in Brody. "Outside one little piece of bonehead thinkin', Slats put up a better all-round performance, but Smithson reckons he'd rather have a comer than a fellow who bobbles a double play in a pinch after six years at the game. I ain't very keen

about lettin' you go, Peb, but I ain't got no choice. Reckon you don't mind, though."

"Mind!" gasped Stone, a smile illuminating his flushed face. "Witness these few tears! You might as well kill a man as shock him to death."

He felt as if he were walking on air. It was worth undergoing that bitter disappointment to experience this joyous reaction. After this, he could never again harbor even a lingering doubt of his real feeling for baseball. The thrill which had come with the realization of what the Wolves scout was after could never have been born of a cold-blooded, impersonal determination to reach a goal.

Later the thought of Ramsey's disappointment—so much greater than his own—brought with it a pang of real regret and pity. The shortstop of the Maroons had lost his chance through one dumb play which had betrayed a lack of quick and correct thinking. He had been a professional for six years, and his work naturally showed a finish and experience which Pebble's wanted; but in the last year or more he had shown no real improvement. He had reached the limit of his powers. Two or three years more would see him begin to slip backward. Stone was genuinely sorry for

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him, but, after all, one's own ambitions and triumphs are more important than other people's failures. As he reflected, nobody would have worried about him if he had been left stranded for another year with the minors.

Whatever he may have felt, Ramsey held up well under the blow. In fact, Chalmers Robinson was infinitely more aggrieved and indignant over the situation than the self-controlled shortstop. During the brief remainder of the season, Gifford found no little diversion in baiting Classy and rubbing it in to his heart's content.

It was no easier to say good-by to the Badgers than it had been a year ago to leave Jim Kelley and his team of hot-tempered, warm-hearted Sluggers. Brick King, on his way West, came as far as New York with him. When they parted in the Grand Central, King's handshake was firm and just a bit prolonged.

"Well, Pebble,"—he smiled, and there was a faint touch of wistfulness beneath his banter—"I reckon you'll forget us now that you've shinned up into the four hundred of baseball-dom."

"Sure," said Pebble; "that's my style! But sometimes it's easier to shin a greased pole than it is to stay up after shinning. You know how

many slip back every year after spring training. But," he added, "I'm going to rub sand on my paws, and stay up, if it's in me to hang on."

"You've got the sand," Brick assured him, "and you'll stay!"

Stone looked forward with pleasant anticipation to the meeting with his father. He had already informed old Bliss by letter of the good news, and the reception which awaited him left nothing to be desired. After dinner, however, when the two had retired to the library, the elder man's face relaxed into distinctly worried lines. "That Brody's been coaching you all wrong, Giff," he declared abruptly.

"Wrong!" echoed his son. "How wrong, dad!"

Straddling before the empty fireplace, Blister frowned, and the jangling of silver in his pocket betrayed his state of mind. "I'll tell you how: This one-man machine-made game is what's wrong. Running the team from the bench is what's the matter with baseball as it's played to-day. Bunting and sacrificing is depended on now more'n straight, hard hitting. In my time, when a runner got on the sacks the next man beefed it out. He didn't stand up and tap the pill gentle and ladylike, as if it was an egg and he was afraid

of breaking the shell. He didn't roll an easy one at the pitcher so he might be throwed out before he could get halfway down to first, even though he had speed enough to beat a jack rabbit in a hundred-yard dash. The player who tried anything like that would 'a' got warned the first time, fined the second, and fired the third. In them days there was batters, let me tell you—Dan Brouthers, Ten-thousand-dollar Kelley, and a host of others. This inside baseball is something to gag over. As if one man, sitting on the bench, could do all the thinkin' for nine men out on the field in a hot game—and do it right! Why, nowadays when a man picks up the willow and goes to hit, he has to look for the manager to see whether he shall bunt, wait it out, or try to knock the stitches out of the horse-hide—just as if he didn't have a teaspoonful of brains of his own. And if he happens to reach first, he don't dare use his own judgment about trying to pilfer; he has to get the sign from the chief when to go. It's making dummies of players, just machines run by somebody else. It's spoiling the game and robbing the men who play it of their character and individuality, and—”

“Wait a minute, governor,” Pebble politely interrupted the heated man. “How about Rabbit

Maranville, and Ty Cobb, and Tris Speaker! Surely they've got a little individuality left, each one of them."

"Oh, of course, there may be now and then an exception," Blister acknowledged; "but the most of them are machines, and this inside-play process has made 'em so. I thought, from what you told me last spring, that they were letting you use your own head in the game, and I was counting on your making a hit with the old methods. But what do I see? The first time—"

"See!" exclaimed his son, straightening abruptly in his chair. "Where did you ever see me play ball!"

Old Blister scowled, and kicked the fender. "Well," he mumbled, "I was in Boston once or twice on business, and on the way I just stopped off—"

He paused, and Gifford grinned. It was characteristic of the man to have done this and kept it to himself. "About how many times did you just happen to stop off?" asked the young man.

"It might have been four or five," grunted Bliss. "What difference does it make, anyway? The point is that every new time I saw you play they'd hampered you a little more with these ma-

chine ideas. It's a blamed lucky thing that scout happened around before they'd licked every bit of individuality out of you. Otherwise he wouldn't have looked at you twice."

"Don't you believe it," Pebble said quietly. "My individuality, as you call it, is the main thing he had against me. He said Ben Frazer would whang it out of me mighty quick. The game has changed a whole lot in twenty-five years; a man who won't sacrifice when a sacrifice is called for, a man who ignores signals, a man who doesn't make himself a well-fitting part of the machine, as you call it, hasn't a show to climb up out of the jungle. He's doomed to continue to bloom in the bone orchard."

"In other words, you mean I'm behind the times!" snorted old Bliss; and his son, remembering the explosions caused by sundry former disagreements, was astonished at his comparative mildness. "Maybe I am, but you won't convince me by talk. There were giants in the old days that'd make your fast ones of these times look about as swift as turtles."

It was his last word on the subject. But as time passed a dozen little things showed his son that Blister's anxieties were far from being set at rest. The bowling alley in the basement was

turned into an ingeniously contrived "cage," where Pebble spent a part of each day keeping himself in condition. The struggle for a place in the Big League was going to be a desperate one—harder than any he had ever undertaken; and he meant to begin it with as few handicaps as possible.

He saw nothing of Miss Meredith, who was spending the winter at Santa Barbara. Some of their mutual friends were careful to inform him that Chalmers Robinson had likewise journeyed to that resort, and was stopping at the same hotel. But whatever Pebble may have felt, he kept it to himself.

When February brought the summons to the Arkansas training camp, he welcomed it with enthusiasm. For weeks he had been impatient to be off. He was tired of the suspense, of imagining all sorts of difficulties and unpleasantness which quite likely existed only in his imagination. The reality could be no worse.

He reached Dowling late in the afternoon, and made his way at once to the long, rambling frame structure pointed out as the hotel. The lobby was fairly well filled with men waiting for supper. Several of them were young and clear-eyed, with the general air of athletes. Stone was

sizing them up curiously when suddenly from one of the groups there stepped forth—Chalmers Robinson!

For a second Pebble gazed at the man whose presence here was infinitely distasteful. But he smoothed out his frown and nodded curtly as his rival strolled up, smiling maliciously. "Didn't expect to see me quite so soon, did you?" said Robinson. "Really, you don't look pleased, either."

"I assure you, my joy is as dense as a vacuum," Gifford returned honestly.

Robinson's eyes narrowed, and a harsh note crept into his voice. "The Wolves need just one good man to strengthen their infield. Evidently Frazer lacked faith in the bunch his scouts dug out of the rural districts. At any rate, he made a deal by which I was transferred to this squad of embryo stars, and the man who beats me to the vacancy will have to hustle."

CHAPTER XXVI

THE SPIEL ON PEBBLE

STONE'S eyes began to twinkle; his lips twitched; he laughed outright. "Dear, dear!" he drawled. "The poor White Wings! What a mistake their foolish, short-sighted manager made! If any team really needs you, it's that bunch of subcellar champions."

Classy flushed and scowled. "That's meant for wit, I fancy," he said, with a contemptuous twist of his mouth. "But it's always the man with the goods, not the hot air, who gathers the plums."

"That being the case," returned the other, "why don't you shut off the blower on your blast furnace?" With which he turned and walked away to the desk.

But, though he treated the affair with careless composure, he was not undisturbed. To have his rival turn up in this unexpected fashion was an unpleasant shock. It was not alone the presence of a dangerous competitor that troubled him, but the intimate association of training-camp life

could not fail to produce constant opportunities for bickering and general clashing.

"I reckon I can hold my own," the shortstop grimly decided, after he had registered and been shown a room. "But it sure is queer for a recruit to be transferred like that before he's even started to show what he can do." Then he dismissed the matter from his mind, made a hurried toilet, and reached the lobby just as the crowd was responding to the supper gong.

Ben Frazer, short, thickset, with silvered temples, and keen blue eyes, catching sight of his latest arrival, paused for a handshake and a few perfunctory words of welcome. Either from pre-occupation or indifference, his manner noticeably lacked cordiality.

The manager strode on ahead toward a small table in a corner, where he took the only remaining seat. Not far away, Robinson and six or eight young men had possessed themselves of a larger table. There was easily room for an additional chair or two, but the recruits glanced up as Stone approached, looked him over more or less openly, and did not invite him to join them. Without betraying outward disturbance at the palpable slight, he took his seat with a middle-aged drummer and a young Cornell graduate in-

terested in cotton. There was no standing on ceremony. Gifford purposely let himself go, and within five minutes his dry wit and amusing comments had his companions convulsed with laughter. Even Tilly, the nemesis of hotel crockery, was observed to smile several times as she hovered near the table; and when this dusky autocrat of the dining-room was moved to mirth the cause thereof was tolerably certain to be really amusing.

Afterward, in the lobby, Manager Frazer performed the belated introductions. The other recruits were passably polite. Several of them seemed to stare rather fixedly at the new man's handsome scarf, or to run their eyes over his perfectly groomed figure with a touch of veiled contempt. But there was no open comment. He was distinctly conscious of a general air of stand-offishness; so he made his manner as indifferent as theirs and soon sought his companions of the dining-room. They were given no reason to suppose Pebble a whit troubled by anything.

Afterward he wondered. It didn't seem natural for a crowd of men, practically strangers to one another, to unite without reason in turning down a new arrival. Had Robinson improved his time by prejudicing them against him? It would

be like him to attempt such a thing, but how had he accomplished it?

Three more recruits arrived by the late train, and the following morning Frazer conducted the cubs out to the ball park to begin work. There was nothing very strenuous about those first few days. Catching, batting, some medicine ball, and an occasional circuit of the grounds at a trot were intermingled with a good deal of lolling on the bench in the comfortable glare of sunshine. Naturally, with each succeeding day the pace grew a little swifter, periods of rest became briefer, and the endeavor of each man to surpass his fellow increased.

Stone soon discovered that he had not been the only man to spend the winter keeping in condition. More than half of the eighteen or twenty recruits had been equally wise, which was a little disappointing after counting on his winter's work to give him an advantage over the others. He was not long, however, in attracting attention. Before many days had passed, an added stiffness in the manner of the other infield aspirants proved conclusively that he was being noticed. It was impossible to get any inkling of Frazer's opinion, but the astute manager had never found it necessary to consult an oculist.

Among the later comers Pebble made a few pleasant acquaintances; but the distant demeanor of the other men remained unaltered. This piqued him, for he had never found it difficult to make friends, and there were several in the crowd who looked as if they might be fine fellows.

Toward the end of their first week of training the explanation came. Some whimsical remark of his in the dressing room had brought a responsive guffaw from a group gathered near. He paid no attention to them at the time, and was surprised as he left the building to have Larry Kirk, a young pitcher whose looks he had liked from the first, fall into step beside him. "Hanged if you're not some card, after all!" Kirk remarked abruptly.

"The deuce I am!" returned the shortstop.

"Maybe Robinson thinks you're a deuce, but I've about decided you're an ace and he's a soiled jack. Is he a friend of yours?"

"Not so you can notice it with the Lick telescope! What's he been saying about me?"

"Oh, he gave us a spiel about you being a millionaire's son, and a snob who thought and said all ball players were common boobs. Told us you didn't have a friend in college because you were such a bounder. According to him, you took up

baseball through a whim. At college, you posed as an amateur after having played professionally, and you were forever running down all professionals as cheap skates who—”

“Well, wouldn’t that congeal your pedal extremities!” exploded Stone. “I think I’ll make him—”

He broke off abruptly, his teeth coming together with a snap. A hundred yards ahead, just passing through the park gates with three or four players, was Robinson himself. A grim expression settled on Pebble’s face, and, without a word of explanation to his companion, he hurried forward to overtake his detractor.

Before he had taken much more than a dozen strides, Gifford’s sense of humor stopped him. It was truly laughable to think of Robinson seeking to injure him in such a childish manner. Measuring his rival by his own low standard, Classy had endeavored to forestall the effect if Stone should tell the truth about him and his posing as an amateur while at college.

When he overtook the little shortstop, Kirk found him chuckling heartily. “Well,” said the surprised pitcher, “you seem to have changed your mind. I thought you were going to climb all over him.”

“That was my first impulse,” the other confessed; “but I’ve concluded that it isn’t worth while!”

CHAPTER XXVII

WHEN THE REAL ONES CAME

BY twos and threes they came on every train, those famous athletes whose names were household words. Sleek, ruddy, fairly bursting with health and vigor, they carried themselves and their immaculate garments—far and wide among the fans the Wolves were noted as a crowd of “swell dressers”—with a certain swing as difficult to define as it was impossible to avoid noticing. It was not so much conceit as the assurance which came from being constantly in the public eye; from having made a place which nothing but fate or inexorable time could take away.

Intensely interested, with pulses quickened, Stone watched them meet in the hotel lobby. He saw hands gripped and shaken, resounding slaps given and received; heard boyish, enthusiastic greetings pass from lip to lip at this first encounter between brothers-in-arms after the long wintering. Scraps of talk came to him in his corner—brief, broken inquiries and answers of

men who knew one another well; who had stood shoulder to shoulder through many a grilling contest; whose comradeship was too perfect to need the finished, rounded sentence. What must it mean to be one of them instead of a humble outsider? Imagine joking with Smoke Jordan, the famous twirler, or being on familiar terms with Bob Courtney, that mighty hitter who had held down the Wolves' center field for more years than a careless fan could recollect!

Somehow the mere sight of these men, so different from what he had expected them to be, emphasized the gulf between his position and theirs. He knew that their lack of training would doubtless, for a space, make them seem his inferiors on the diamond; but they had "arrived," while he was still in the process of evolution—crude, and green, and inexperienced. And he went to bed wondering how any fellow in his position could get a swelled head. But other recruits made the team, why not he? He had his chance; if he failed, it wouldn't be through lack of trying his level best.

If the warming up of the cubs had been a leisurely performance, that of the regulars was infinitely more so. These wise old players knew the danger of straining muscles soft from months of

disuse. They ran no chances. To many of the recruits, proud possessors of strong "whips" and not unwilling to show off, this extreme caution of the older men seemed overdone. A few of the more thoughtless sneered a little at the throwing of the regulars and their frequent ineffective wallops at a simple roundhouse curve. Some of the cubs seemed to think that nearly all the veterans were ready for the scrap heap.

"Old Courtney's all in," declared Jim Thomas, a southpaw from the Savannah club. "I heard Jordan and a couple of others saying last night that he'd come to the end of his string. It's about time the old fossil stepped down and gave somebody else a chance. He's been playing ball since the flood."

Gifford glanced over at the famous outfielder, who was waiting his turn to bat. Tall, straight, lithe, a thick mass of wavy, blond hair overshadowing an almost boyish face, the man seemed to be in the very prime of physical perfection. What if he had been in the game for many years? He could not be more than thirty-five, and last season his hitting had been the sensation of the league. Yet they called him old!

"Old!" muttered the shortstop to himself, as the big fielder brought his bat around with a

powerful free swing that sent the ball humming into the outfield. "They always say a man's falling off as soon as he's thirty, but Smoke Jordan could be a lot better employed than running down his own teammate."

He had taken a dislike to Jordan, a rather autocratic player who was, beyond question, Frazer's star pitcher. So far as Smoke was concerned, the lowly recruits did not exist. Courtney, on the contrary, always had a nod and a smile for the youngsters, and frequently paused for a little chat or to give a bit of advice in a friendly, casual manner which had no trace of condescension about it. In this generous way he made a smiling suggestion about Stone's position at the plate, and Pebble appreciated it.

In a short time, something like a friendship arose between the oddly assorted pair—a friendship which seemed to Gifford absurdly one-sided. He could not understand why Courtney was so ready to aid him with suggestions, advice, and bits of valuable information drawn from his wide experience. The veteran was a man of impulse who quickly formed pronounced likes and dislikes, and something about the whimsical yet earnest shortstop had attracted him and led him to believe the young man possessed the stuff of which

ball players are made. He had a generous nature, and was ready to help a lad of the right sort who looked like a comer.

Courtney's coaching of this particular young man aroused comment. Pebble was wonderfully fast on his feet, and he had a way of pulling off plays that made even the veterans open their eyes. But they had seen other equally promising cubs fizzle out, and not a few predicted that he would prove to be a flash in the pan. He was much too fresh, they said, and a few even criticized him for aping the Wolves in their well-known specialty of sartorial adornment. The majority of the cubs were jealous. Kirk, McKeown, and one or two others remained friendly. Of course Robinson never lost an opportunity to backbite his rival. Stump Huston was more open in his expressions of strong dislike.

Presently organized games between the regulars and the cubs gave Stone more and better opportunities to show what he was made of. In these daily contests, conducted with a fierce but more or less friendly rivalry, the shortstop kept up the pace he had shown in ordinary practice, and this fanned the flame of resentment in the rival infielders. Curiously, it was not Robinson

who now seemed to be the most affected. Either he had learned wisdom, or he was biding his time. He no longer allowed his anger to get the best of him, but fell back on the cool, composed, sure methods of playing which had been his strongest card.

Stump Huston, playing mainly at second, lacked his friend's self-control. He snarled at Gifford whenever the latter's swift feet carried him chasing a batted ball into territory which Stump seemed to regard as belonging to him by right of eminent domain. Each day he grew more surly and ill-tempered, until at last the climax came in a trick which reminded the shortstop unpleasantly of his apprenticeship in the bush. Both men went after a short fly. Just as a collision seemed unavoidable, Huston swerved, caught Stone's toe with his foot, and sent him spinning head over heels. Huston went down also, but was up in a minute, claiming that it was an accident, and blaming the other man.

Stone was temporarily stunned and dazed. His shoulder was wrenched and his side hurt. He was forced to leave the field, and for two days he was out of the game. But he raised no "holler," made no complaint to any one.

It chanced that Frazer, who seldom missed any-

thing, did not see this affair, and so Stump's claim of an accident went. But Gifford knew better, as likewise did others besides Huston. That night Robinson found a chance privately to give Stump a bit of advice.

"Better not try anything like that on the field again, old man," he said. "If the chief had seen you, he'd have known you gave Pebble the foot, and he sure would have handed you something."

Stump scowled. "I couldn't help it," he asserted. "That man keeps me raw all the time. When I saw he was going to get to the ball first, it came over me all at once to trip him. Minute I did it I was afraid I'd have Frazer on my neck."

"You were lucky."

"I certainly did send him turning cart wheels. Perhaps that'll take some of the starch out of him so he'll keep in his place hereafter. I've an idea it'll get his nerve."

Huston was mistaken. When Stone returned to his position on the third day, there was no evidence that the unpleasant experience had affected him at all. He was as swift and dashing as ever, and he invaded Huston's territory quite as frequently as before. Seeing this, Stump became wary. Something told him that Stone was wait-

ing for him to try the trick again, and he carefully refrained from doing so. Which was a very good thing for him and a great disappointment to Gifford.

CHAPTER XXVIII

CREDIT FOR BRAINS

“**I** WAS laying for him,” Stone told Kirk, as they discussed the affair in their room one night before supper. Since the arrival of the regulars most of the cubs had been obliged to double up, and these two had paired. “He couldn’t have pulled off that sort of stuff the first time if I’d expected for a minute to run up against it outside the bushes. If he— Come in!”

A brisk rap on the door had caused him to give the invitation. Ben Frazer appeared. For a moment he stood there silent, an odd expression in his keen, blue eyes. Then he stepped into the room, leaving the door ajar. “I’d like to see you a minute, Stone,” he said politely.

Taking the hint, Kirk picked up his hat and hastily departed. The manager closed the door, drew an oblong slip of paper from his pocket, and held it out for the inspection of the wondering recruit. “Perhaps you’ll explain the meaning of this,” he said.

Puzzled and curious at the other's manner, the young man took the paper. A glance showed him that it was a check for fifty dollars, drawn in favor of himself, and signed "Benj. Frazer."

"But what's it for?" he asked, perplexed.
"I've had my—"

"Turn it over!" said the manager brusquely.

Stone did so. His jaw dropped. Across the back was the indorsement "Gifford Stone" in the familiar dashing scrawl which his friends and correspondents usually characterized as hen tracks.

"But I never wrote that," protested the shortstop, his bewilderment increasing.

"And I never drew the check."

The significance in Frazer's tone brought a touch of hardness to Pebble's face and sent his chin up. "You mean it's a forgery?"

"Precisely."

"And you think that I—"

"What else can I think?"

The shortstop's steady gaze never left the manager's eyes. "I never saw the thing before," he stated a trifle warmly. "There's no point in my trying such a trick. I don't need money. If I wanted to forge your name, do you suppose I'm silly enough to do it like this, and bring you down

on me hotfoot? If you can imagine me a crook, I hope you give me credit for some brains. Where was it cashed?"

"Blum's store on Franklin Street."

"Well, there you are!" exclaimed Pebble triumphantly. "It should not be difficult to get a description of the man who turned it in. I'll guarantee it won't fit me."

"Quite so," agreed the manager. "I've already done that. The description fits neither you nor any other man in my squad. In a place like this, it shouldn't be hard to find a cat's-paw to pull out your chestnuts."

Gifford nearly lost control of his temper. Just in time he bethought himself that a cool head was needed in a moment like this. "Maybe not," he retorted; "but I don't mean to be made a cat's-paw myself. There's something else about this thing that I noticed right off the bat: It's written in black ink, check indorsement and all. My fountain pen happens to be filled with blue ink, and there isn't any other kind in this room. I'll show you."

He led the manager to a table by one of the windows, on which, beside some magazines and a book or two, was a pad, blotter, writing paper, and a small bottle of ink. Of this he pulled the cork

and poured a small stream of the fluid out on the pad. "Blue as indigo," he said. "And look at this." He produced his fountain pen, and wrote a few words to prove his point. "Anybody can tell you it's the kind I always use. Larry doesn't like it, and growls—"

He broke off abruptly. Frazer, standing over the wastebasket, had suddenly dived into it. He drew out several torn bits of paper. It took him but a moment to fit them together on the table. Then he turned again on the shortstop. "How about that?" he inquired, pointing a stubby finger at the paper.

It was a single large sheet of commercial writing paper that had been torn into four pieces. From top to bottom it was closely scrawled with repetitions of the manager's signature. Those at the top of the sheet were crude, but they improved farther down; at the bottom the reproduction was almost perfect. It was palpably the unknown forger's practice work. As he looked it over, Pebble felt himself shaking with rage.

"It's a plant!" he cried hoarsely. "Can't you see that? The real crook is trying to throw the blame on me. The circumstances, the silly endorsement of a forgery, the finding of this practically undestroyed paper here should convince you.

That basket is emptied every morning, and I haven't been in this room except with Kirk since before breakfast. The rest of the time I've been out on the field or downstairs with the other men. I can prove—”

“You don't have to,” interrupted Frazer quietly. From the moment of his appearance in the room, he had been watching the young recruit with a keen, critical appraisal. Now, as if his mind was made up, the cold severity of his expression suddenly relaxed. “I reckon I can take your word for it. You don't strike me as the kind to pull off a trick like this, but I had to make sure.” He hesitated a moment, grimly thoughtful. “Do you know of anybody who'd be likely to try it?”

Stone was uncertain. He had several enemies on the squad, but it is one thing to feel professional jealousy and quite another to accuse a man of forgery. Frazer advised him to keep still, holding that the perpetrator would be likely in the course of time to trip himself.

After the manager had departed, carrying with him the scraps of paper, a little incident, so trivial as to be forgotten until now, came back to Pebble's remembrance. Just before dinner on his way to their room with Larry, they had passed Huston coming toward the stairs. The man roomed on

the floor above, and he could have no business in that corridor unless it was to see some of his friends. With doors rarely or never locked, nothing could be simpler than for a person to slip in, drop the incriminating scraps of paper in the wastebasket, and depart without being caught. Huston's grudge against the shortstop, and his vicious, revengeful nature, might have led him into doing it.

CHAPTER XXIX

A SLIPPED COG

SUSPECTING what he did, Gifford's enforced association with Huston was naturally distasteful, and he was decidedly relieved two days later when the news was passed around that Stump was going to the Pacific Coast Catamounts. His departure was the first break, and it brought the remainder of the recruits sharply on their toes. From that moment an atmosphere of suspense was marked throughout the squad. The men redoubled their efforts to make a good impression. Nerves were in evidence on and off the diamond, and visiting strangers were looked upon with darkest suspicion.

The inevitable process of elimination had begun. Good players had to be sacrificed because there were others just as good or better, and the manager set about the task with cold-blooded, impersonal judgment. A few of the unfortunates betrayed a lack of sporting blood, and departed in a cloud of gloom, making disgruntled talk of pull and unfairness; but most of them accepted

their fate with a semblance, at least, of philosophic resignation.

"I've been feeling it in my bones for a week," wryly observed Larry Kirk, as he packed up to start for Savannah. "The old man's beginning to slash off heads right and left. Hope yours don't fall next, Pebble, but if you dodge the ax you'll be one lucky guy."

His going made Stone feel as if the net was closing tighter about him. The opinion prevailed that, with the excellent material he possessed in his substitutes, Frazer would need only one additional utility man, and the choice appeared to lay between Stone and Robinson. To Gifford's alert mind, the signs seemed to point to the ultimate triumph of his rival. As an example, when the team was divided into two squads and sent off each Saturday and Sunday to play various clubs in the vicinity, Robinson was usually to be found with the regulars, while Pebble went with the team composed mainly of cubs. Bob Courtney, who managed the latter nine, assured him that this meant very little, but he was not in a state of mind to be convinced easily. No one, however, except the veteran outfielder even guessed that he was worried; he kept the squad continually entertained with his dry wit and amusing comment,

seemed confident and assured, and wrote home hopefully.

Then came the unexpected. Mel Cowden, the most promising of Frazer's utility infielders, sliding to third in a game with the Hot Springs Terrors, caught his spikes in the bag and broke an ankle. Stone was among the first to reach him, and helped carry him from the field.

When the team left Dowling and began its tortuous progress northward, Gifford went with it.

There had been a last weeding out at the eleventh hour, which, except for a young pitcher or two who might possibly be released later, trimmed the squad down to its regular fighting strength. Pebble had obtained a foothold, but he realized perfectly that the struggle was by no means over.

As a rule, any recruit is doomed to spend a year, at least—sometimes two—warming the bench and getting the proper experience and schooling to fit him for the game. Occasionally, under certain circumstances, he is put in against a weaker club, and, if he happens to be a good stickman, the manager sometimes uses him as a pinch hitter. Yet weeks often pass while he sits idle, chafing under the inaction, condemned to watch day after day the playing of men he feels

certain he can outclass, and willing to give almost anything for a chance to prove that he can.

The Wolves' infield was composed of four players who had worked together so long that they presented the spectacle of a well-oiled machine. Each one seemed to know precisely what the other three would do in every conceivable situation. The result was a truly admirable exhibition of teamwork, and Cottrell, Manny, Vedder and Gibson were names to conjure with throughout the league.

The first two were comparatively young and in the prime of their power. Rube Vedder, at short, had been in the game longer, but age apparently made no impression on his playing. On the contrary, experience had given him a vast assortment of wise old tricks, and youngsters on both his own and opposing teams regarded him with a sort of awe wondering if he was going to last forever.

The fourth member of this quartet was not so lucky. Splinter Gibson had held down third base for more years than the average person could remember, but this season he showed perceptible signs of slowing up. The deterioration would scarcely have been noticed by the fans, but to his teammates, and, above all, to his manager, it was

evident that something was amiss in the wing which had made the sphere scorch the air when he whipped it across the diamond. He hit as well as ever, and was as speedy on the paths, but that touch of effort in his throwing troubled Frazer and made him take precautions in the selecting and training of a first-class substitute.

"The old boy has a lot in him yet," the manager told himself; "but one of these days he's bound to crack, and there's no sense being caught napping."

Chalmers Robinson was tried out in several of the exhibition games. For a recruit, he made a really remarkable showing. Pebble held down the bench, and tried to do the same with his envy. To himself he reluctantly admitted that Classy could play ball. He heard some of the regulars saying that the man's game bore a strong resemblance to what Gibson had shown in his palmer days. Before long, the general opinion prevailed that Frazer could not have picked a man better fitted, when the time came, to step into the veteran's shoes.

Bob Courtney was not so optimistic regarding Robinson. He said little, however, even to Stone; but that little was oddly comforting to the recruit, who was watching with a jealous eye the triumph

of his rival. "Keep the checkrein on, son," admonished Bob one night, as they sat chatting on the Pullman. "You're lucky to be where you are. I was two years breaking into the big game, and I played just four times that first season. Sore? Well, some! But if I had to do it all over again, I wouldn't change a single little detail."

"You wouldn't!" exclaimed Gifford. "But why—"

"I didn't get away with the fool notion that success was a kind of tame bird fluttering around ready to light the minute I showed myself. I've had to work like a horse for everything I've got, so I know what it's worth. Your friend Robinson doesn't. He never will. What comes through sheer luck he'll credit to his own ability. He's the sort to get all swelled up over himself, and when a ball player does that—good night!"

Pebble had never considered the situation in just that light before. Perhaps, instead of envying Robinson's good fortune, he ought to be thankful that he was apparently doomed to serve out his apprenticeship. Yet, turning them over in his mind, the recruit could find no deep consolation in Courtney's remarks when left alone to think about them.

They were speeding over the last lap of the

homeward journey. Only two more exhibition games remained to be played, but both those games would be of a very different caliber from the almost daily contests which had diverted the northward progress of the Wolves. To-morrow their opponents would be the Yellow Jackets, a first-division team of the rival Big League. A day later they were scheduled to meet their old enemies, the White Wings.

It would be real baseball. Next to the impossible joy of taking part in that wonderful opening game, Stone felt that he would rather be on the field against one or both of these great teams. Willingly would he risk a swelled head, or any of those chances Courtney seemed to think inseparable from being plunged too early into fast company. Fancy facing "Smoky Pete" Corbin and getting a hit off him! Imagine the thrill of making connections with one of Iron Man Raby's swift benders!

Gifford's face glowed, and his eyes sparkled; then he came to earth with a thud. "Wake up!" he said. "Your pipe's going out!"

With a shake of his head, he sprang up and turned toward the smoking compartment, where the regular nightly poker session was in full swing. Bed was not attractive. What was the use in

keeping regular hours when one did nothing but sit around all day?

He walked briskly down the aisle toward the door at the farther end. A sudden burst of laughter from the card players quickened his step, and he bumped squarely into Ben Frazer. "Hello!" said the manager. "You're the man I want to see." He drew the shortstop back into the almost empty car. "Rube's a bit off his feed—some of this miserable canned grub, I reckon—and, if he don't come round, I'm going to play you at short to-morrow. Sit down here where we can talk a little."

Stone listened intently to Frazer's terse suggestions and advice, but all the time a pestering thought was buzzing tumultuously through his brain: This was his chance, but what if it had come too soon? What if, through lack of experience, overeagerness, or even stage fright—

CHAPTER XXX

AT THE DICTATOR'S MEROV

AS the visitors trotted in from preliminary practice, Pebble Stone jerked down his cap, and, with the same movement, swept away a slight film of moisture dampening his forehead. His nerves, usually so calm, were jumpy. They had been so all the morning, and his lack of self-containment irritated the shortstop. He told himself he had only to go into the game as if the Yellow Jackets were the Panthers, out there in the bush, or Johnny McElroy's Maroons, and he would have the chance to make the hit he longed for. Nevertheless, a mere glance at the wide horseshoe was enough to make his pulse run swiftly.

The warm spring sunshine, the interesting novelty of seeing their favorites pitted against a team like the Wolves, had drawn forth a goodly crowd, which was chattering, joshing, and yelling shrilly in the sheer exuberance that marked the ending of a winter's hibernation. Tier upon tier

they loomed up, closely packed, and latently ominous, the real dictators of the diamond, waiting the slightest excuse—or none at all—to change their careless laughter into roars of callous abuse.

Stone slipped into the sheltered seclusion of the bench. "I ought to find a jellyfish and swap spines with him," he told himself in measureless scorn.

Furtively sizing up the other men, he was momentarily chagrined to find that they all seemed to consider the affair a great lark. To be sure, some of that excessive nonchalance might be the product of clever simulation, just as he himself was giving an accurate imitation of carefree assurance. There was a good deal of consolation in the thought; even more in the discovery that Robinson was distinctly overdoing it.

"Regular buck fever, that's all it is," decided Pebble. "Classy's got it as bad as I have, which is some comfort."

It seemed odd that he should be having his first attack of nerves at this late day. When he came to think of it, his *début* with the Sluggers, or even that first appearance with Joe Brody's much more efficient team, were both more trying than the present occasion; yet he had been cool as a cucumber. Perhaps it was because the fever of

the game had not then entered into his blood to make him care as he did now.

A sudden hush, followed by the bawling incoherence of the umpire's announcements, sent a tingling down the recruit's spine.

For once rumor was correct: Smoky Pete Corbin was to pitch. As Gifford watched the wide, lean, awkward-looking man stroll out upon the diamond, perfect assurance written all over him, the sense of his own youth and rawness threatened to overwhelm him like a flood.

If Corbin was cool, he had nothing on Tug Manny, who was to lead off at bat. The sight of Tug's freckled face, its big mouth set in a tolerant grin, its jaws working with rhythmic precision, heartened Stone wonderfully. Manny was noted for reaching the initial sack by hook or crook.

"Stick it on 'em to-day, Pete!" howled the bleacherites, plunging with delight into their self-constituted duties as coachers. "Show up these fourflushers!"

Corbin stood on one leg and clawed the air, letting drive his fast one. Manny started to swing, but checked himself, and the ball shot across his shoulders into the catcher's mitt. When a strike was called, Tug frowned and made a gesture indicating extreme altitude.

"Only one," thought Pebble. "He'll hit or walk; that's his way."

His confidence in the batter turned out to be unwarranted. Manny let one wide one pass, swung at a coaxter, and then sent up a high fly that the center fielder bagged almost without stirring from his tracks.

The fans rejoiced raucously, and adjured their idol to keep up the good work. Corbin's speed did not awe Slug Kipper a whit, however, and with three and two called, he pounded the sphere at the shortstop, who juggled it long enough for the runner to make first.

Larry Cottrell was the next to fall before Corbin, fouling out back of third. Stone turned his eyes anxiously on Courtney, moving to the pan. Mentally he implored Bob to do something. And, waiting coolly, the hard-hitting fielder picked one that suited him and drove out a single which made Gifford's heart leap exultingly.

"That's the boy!" muttered the shortstop delightedly. "Now if Scrappy—"

He broke off abruptly, and rose swiftly from the bench. For a moment or two he had forgotten himself. He batted after Scrappy Betts. As he stepped from the dugout, the rumbling, inarticulate murmur of the great crowd smote his ears

like the roar of a tempest to one just emerging from shelter. Mechanically he stooped over the row of bats, testing one after another. If Scrappy reached first, possibly it would populate the corners with two down. For a moment Stone shrank from the responsibility, almost wishing Betts would fan. Then his teeth clicked together, and he straightened up, twirling two bats deftly. Let it come!

He watched the batter. Two strikes! Almost fiercely he hoped the man wouldn't fan. When the welcome crack came he whooped aloud, and beheld the sphere fall short of the speeding left fielder. Then he walked swiftly to the plate.

Above the din, the click of telegraph instruments sounded from the press table where the reporters were swarming almost as thickly as they would on the opening game of the season. They were telling that one of Frazer's more or less proclaimed finds was now at bat. But Stone heard nothing, saw nothing, thought of nothing but the business in hand. His mind, in full command of his body, was concentrated on the job of solving Smoky Pete's slants. Of nervousness he felt not a flicker. His time having come, he was master of himself.

"Oh, look at little pink cheeks!" shrilled a voice from the stand.

"Don't hit the poor child, Pete!" begged another.

They might have spared their throats and lungs. Pebble's eyes were fastened on the tall, rangy pitcher. He smiled a bit as the moundsman sparred for time. The trick did not irritate him; it brought no touch of impatience or over-anxiousness; time meant no more to him than it did to Smoky Pete; he had it to spare. Suddenly Corbin tied himself into a knot and uncoiled, sending the sphere, swift as a bullet, toward the plate.

CHAPTER XXXI

HIS BIG LEAGUE DEBUT

IF there was any ball made to order for Pebble Stone, it was one on the inside corner across the shoulders. He could hook it a mile. Never having pitched to this insignificant-looking recruit, Corbin naturally had no means of knowing this. He simply put over the one he had found most effective in the past, especially with the many bushers he had been up against.

Gifford met the ball with a free, sharp swing, and the crack of the impact rang clear and true as minted gold. Like a leaping fawn, he was off; like a scared rabbit, he streaked it down the line to first.

Over the sack and away toward second he went, with the speed of a hundred-yard sprinter. Two fielders were after the ball; one of them would have it in a second. But still there was a chance that he could stretch the hit into a three-bagger—a bare chance. If he failed, greenhorn that he was, he would be roasted by the crowd, his team-

mates, the manager, and the reporters. If he succeeded—well, it was something worth trying for, and he took the long chance.

Coming up from second like a gale of wind, he saw the third baseman set himself to make the catch. The ball was coming, too. Stone hit the dirt and shot under the man, reaching for the cushion with one foot. He found it at the same instant, it seemed to him, that the guardian of the hassock nailed him with the horsehide.

Panting, he lay still as the dust settled, scarcely daring to hope. He could not see the umpire or hear his voice. It was the protesting roar from the stand which conveyed to him the grateful knowledge that he had been declared safe, and brought him to his feet like a thing made of rubber.

“If you could only hit once in a while you’d be a real ball player kid,” drawled Manny, his eyes twinkling. “Why didn’t you make a home run while you were about it?”

“What was the use?” returned Pebble, beating the dust from his shirt in little spurts. “I’d have had to run that much farther, and we don’t need the score.”

Doubt, nervousness, hesitation had vanished as mist before the morning sun. Like the diver who

has made his plunge and found the water not nearly as cold as he expected, Gifford glowed joyously. Smoky Pete was no demigod, but just an ordinary human with weaknesses like all the rest. Henceforth the shortstop would face him without a trace of worry.

Pebble did not score. The next man fanned, and the time came for him to show what he could do on the field.

Perhaps, in his eagerness to make good after that long period on the bench, he became too anxious. Also, it seemed that fate, having handed him one big trump, dealt him thereafter some difficult cards to play. He did not make the flawless showing he had hoped for; but then, covering the big amount of ground that he did, and trying sometimes for the impossible, it was a bit remarkable that only two errors were recorded against him. At least, he was guilty of nothing resembling bonehead thinking.

His "stunts" were wildly applauded by the stand and bleachers alike, and the crowd was equally prompt to deride his failures. In the press stand it was different. The seasoned newspaper veterans, not a few of whom had followed the game for many years, frowned upon the new shortstop's pyrotechnics. That he needed bak-

ing was almost the universal opinion, and more than one proceeded to give him a roast. While most of the reporters commented on the speed and snap shown by the Wolves so early in the season, in all that body of newspaper men only one fathomed the cause thereof.

Philip Chatterton, the greatest expert of them all, began early in the day to suspect that the new shortstop had something to do with it; with the ending of the seventh inning he was sure. In spite of his errors, there was a dash and daring, a lightning swiftness in every movement of the raw recruit which, unconsciously, no doubt, transmitted itself to the other players, and keyed them up to a pace they rarely reached save toward the finish of a close season.

Chatterton found himself mildly interested by the novelty of the spectacle. His wide experience had brought him into touch with similar cases, but usually the possessors of such infectious magnetism were tried veterans, brilliant, wise, canny, and dependable in any emergency.

“The kid’s going to be valuable after he’s stowed away some experience and learned a few things,” decided the expert. “As it is, I’m afraid Ben won’t get much use of him this season.”

The Wolves won the game, and Stone was happy

until he saw the newspapers. One stated that he seemed to fancy himself the whole team; another said he had interfered with the other players, and grand-stood at every opportunity; but it was the advice of a third that Manager Frazer should spank him soundly and put him back in his little trundle bed, that made him squirm as if the recommended chastisement were actually taking place.

After a little, however, he laughed softly. "Jingoes!" he breathed. "I made a hit—now didn't I! I thought I was sent out there to play baseball, not to stand round and adorn the scenery. I wonder what the chief really thought? He didn't say anything."

Nor did old Ben say anything until after the exhibition game with the first-division team, which the Wolves lost. Despite the newspapers, Pebble did not chain down a whit in this game, and he made only one error. This, however, was costly, and it was made on a batted ball that Tug Manny might have handled had not Stone, barely touching the sphere with his fingers, deflected it.

When it was all over, the shortstop heard from Frazer at last. The manager gave him a verbal trimming that made his ears tingle. Instead of wilting under this lashing, however, he took it like

a sport. At the finish, he drew a long breath, and observed: "I'm sorry about one thing."

"What's that?" growled Ben.

"I've got to buy a new hat. The one I've been wearing is a seven, but six and an eighth is my size now."

"Get a six," advised Frazer, "and put a string on it so you won't lose it in a breeze." In spite of himself, he could not conceal a grin as he turned away.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE CLASS OF CLASSY

THE opening day came at last with its noise and bustle, its blare of brass bands, its dense, close-packed mob of shouting, cheering humanity. Here Stone got his first glimpse of Jake Beatty, rotund, thick-necked, heavy-jowled, and very much in evidence in the owner's box. Beside him sat a woman, young, blond, and handsome in a dashing sort of way, who might have been his daughter, but who was really his second wife. The shortstop gleaned this information from overhearing a chance remark of Robinson's, in which he sneeringly referred to her as "that bottle blonde." Gifford wondered idly what Classy had against her. She looked like a very decent sort, though not exactly the type that appealed to the shortstop.

Rube Vedder, recovered from his recent indisposition, was in the game. It was the first good chance Pebble had had to study the veteran's work and compare it with his own. He saw very quickly that Vedder's methods were radically dif-

ferent. Vedder was preëminently a safe, conservative player. He was swift, sure, and wily as a fox, with an almost uncanny intuition as to the direction of a hit, which brought a touch of envy to the man on the bench.

But as the game progressed this feeling oozed away. Gradually the shortstop realized that the older man was straining every nerve and working up to the very limit of his reserve power. That brainy headwork and admirable restraint which Stone was finding so difficult to acquire was Vedder's chief asset. What had come from years of ripe experience was now being used to cover the loss of snap, and dash, and endurance—to minimize, in short, the slow failing of those powers his young rival possessed in abundance.

With Vedder in the game, the Wolves played well and smoothly, but somehow a touch of the snap and dash shown in those two preliminary contests seemed lacking. Their opponents, the first-division Specters, took three games out of the four, and in the succeeding series against the Panthers the best the home team could do was to break even.

The succession of interminable afternoons with nothing to do but size up the opposing players and plan what he might accomplish if Frazer ever

put him into a game, followed by evenings of listening to old Blister's growing complaints of managerial favoritism, began to get on Pebble's nerves. He grew irritable, at times almost moody. Things which normally would have left him unmoved seemed more and more to annoy him out of all due proportion. He lost not a little of his whimsical good humor.

Chief among the things which irritated him was Robinson's air of tolerant superiority. Having become a fixture at third base, Classy carefully cultivated the older men. He was a smooth talker, and an all-round good fellow when he chose to be. He now exerted himself to make a good impression, and he played his cards well. His performance one night at a music hall was little short of masterly.

Stone was not one of the party, but he learned all the details next morning from Bob Courtney. For several days afterward it was the principal topic of conversation in the clubhouse. On the impulse of the moment several of the players had drifted into the St. George, where the drawing card happened to be Bat McCarty, the well-known welter-weight. After the usual bout with his sparring partner, the pugilist perfunctorily made his customary offer to put on the gloves with

any aspiring person in the audience who cared to take the risk, and, to the astonishment of his companions, Robinson made instant response.

"Some of the boys tried to hold him back," recounted Courtney, "but he was too quick for them. By Jove! We needn't have worried. You know there's no love lost between us, but he sure can handle his dukes. I'll hand it to him there. He outpointed McCarty all along the line, and at the end of three rounds the slugger was so far gone that his manager had to butt in to save his face. There was pretty near a riot in the audience."

Stone packed his trunk for the Western tour in an uncomfortable frame of mind. His patience was rapidly becoming a thing of shreds and tatters. Moreover, he realized that it was only a question of time before his grouch, hitherto concealed from the other members of the team, would get the best of his self-control.

On the train, as if he had just happened to think of it, Frazer curtly informed him that there was a possibility of his being used the following day in the first of a series with the White Wings. Although it seemed too good to be true, and he had to hold on to himself to refrain from whooping with joy, Gifford succeeded in keeping his elation hidden.

That evening, and the next day before the game, he went over and over with ceaseless caution the many bits of advice and warning he had received from both Frazer and Bob. Repression seemed to be the keynote of them all. He must try to remember that there were eight other players on the team; he must hold in check those lightning impulses which had made him try for everything he could reach whether it was in his own territory or that of some other man.

Of course he overdid it. The long wait and the constant brooding over his faults combined to swing the pendulum the other way. His work in the game was not exactly mediocre, but it did err on the side of overcaution, and was noticeably lacking in the dash and daring which had formerly been pronounced. He was furious with himself. When he growled about his stupidity to Courtney, Bob merely laughed.

“You don’t expect to get it all in a minute, do you?” asked the veteran, as they entered the club-house. “Most recruits are a full season, or even two, breaking into the team. You’ve swung to both extremes. Every time you play after this you ought to come closer to hitting the right average. Use your head all the time, son. It’s a matter of practice and brainwork.”

"That sounds easy, Bob," said Pebble, "but how am I going to get any practice when Ben shoves me into a game only once a month?"

He paused rather abruptly at the door of the locker room. They had delayed a little on the field, so that most of the players were through their showers and hustling into street clothes. Close by the door, his toilet almost complete, sat Robinson, lacing up a shoe. Gathered about him were four or five of his particular cronies. From the expression of their faces he was evidently in the midst of an uncommonly diverting recital. The sudden silence which greeted the appearance of Courtney and Stone, no less than the elaborately unconscious air assumed by one or two of the group, brought to Gifford the swift suspicion that either he or his friend had been the subject of the conversation.

Robinson, however, betrayed no embarrassment. "Come in, Peb," he invited, in that deliberately patronizing manner which so rasped Stone. "Maybe you can tell us what we want to know. You always were a good guesser."

The shortstop leaned indolently against the doorcasing, his eyebrows slightly lifted. "Is it possible you ever have to be told anything, Classy?" he exclaimed, in pretended surprise.

A flash of annoyance, flickered in Robinson's eyes, but vanished before a rush of vindictive triumph. "I don't—often," he retorted. "This is a case, though, where you'll probably be able to give me information. We've just been trying to figure out why Ben's dickering for a new infielder."

It was impossible to miss the significance of his tone; the most obtuse could not fail to get his meaning. Beneath the loose folds of his flannel shirt Gifford's muscles tightened suddenly, but his features remained impenetrable. "A new infielder!" he exclaimed, in interested surprise. "Really! You don't mean to say the chief is going to give you an understudy? Can it be possible?"

Robinson's tanned face took on a deeper tinge. "Not likely," he replied, "when he's got a palsied old shortstop aching for the toboggan route to the minors, and nobody to take the position but the greenest kind of a half-ripe quince."

In his eagerness to take a dig at his enemy, Robinson had forgotten for an instant his policy of ingratiating himself with the older men. The words had scarcely passed his lips before he remembered that, while Vedder himself was not present, the veteran's friends could hardly help

hearing the slur. The realization of this did not tend to improve his temper.

"After the show you made of yourself out there," he continued viciously, "I shouldn't think you'd waste much time wondering why Frazer's hunting for new timber."

Stone's eyes shone. "I was pretty bad, wasn't I?" he confessed naïvely. "I tell you what, it don't pay to copy another man's style. You seem to get away so well with that play-it-safe, never-take-a-chance stuff, I thought I'd try it. I ought to have been wise that one of that brand was all a club could carry without swamping."

Some one snickered, and Robinson blazed with wrath. "That's meant to be funny, I suppose!" he snarled. "Let me tell you—"

"Funny—not much!" cut in Stone, with a regretful shake of his head. "It's only too painfully true. I'm afraid there's nothing for me to do but get back to real work again and leave the sure things and virgin-error column to you."

Robinson was on his feet, his face purple, his eyes blazing. "Just cut that stuff out, and do it quick!" he commanded harshly. "A little more, and you may get something you don't expect."

Pebble smiled engagingly. "Like the poor old geezer at the St. George last week?" he inquired

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sweetly. "It was an awful shame to crab his act like that, Classy. There he was, soft as mush and fat as butter from weeks and weeks of mixed ale and loafing, with his little sparring stunt all doped out so's not to tire him too much; or take his wind. Why, he'd just about forgotten what a real scrap was like. You had to butt in just for the sake of a grand-stand play, and spoil—"

Robinson leaped forward like a cat. Before any one could make a move to prevent it, he let drive at Stone, caught him on the point of the jaw, and knocked him with a crash against the door-casing.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE CHALLENGE

PEBBLE awoke to find himself stretched on a rubbing table with something soft under his head, and the pungent tang of ammonia in his nostrils. For a moment he stared blankly into the face of Bob Courtney, who was bending over him. Then he raised himself slowly on one elbow.

"Where's the man that did it?" he asked, his gaze sweeping the room and discovering, besides Courtney, only Tug Manny and Dennis McKeown. "Gone!"

The center fielder nodded. "Uh-huh. Good riddance, too!"

Stone sat up, waving away the quickly proffered assistance of Courtney. "I'm all right now," he said gruffly. He slid off the table. As his feet touched the floor, he announced in a quiet, matter-of-fact tone: "I'm going to give that dub a nice, comfortable thrashing."

Manny stared in astonishment. Courtney's ex-

pression was first incredulous, then puzzled. Pebble's eyes were clear and hard; his mouth resolute. The color had come back into his face.

"I only wish you could," declared the outfielder sincerely, "but that's impossible."

Stone moved toward the door, unbuttoning his shirt. "Is it?" he laughed queerly. "Then you're going to see a miracle if you stick around; the impossible is going to happen."

The characteristic drawl, in itself suggestive of whimsical humor, was gone from his voice. He was strangely calm, apparently almost placid, yet something made them feel that within him a demon of resentful rage was dancing.

"Oh, see here, kid," cried Manny, his eyes widening, "don't be a fool! That guy's a regular professional slugger. I saw him do up Bat McCarty last week, and, believe me, he can handle his mitts like a white hope."

Pebble vanished into the locker room. They followed him. While the shortstop stripped and got into his street clothes they did their best, singly and in concert, to point out the utter folly of what he meant to attempt. To all of their arguments he turned a deaf ear.

"He hit me, didn't he?" he remarked, as he painstakingly brushed his hair. "I'll promise you

one thing: I won't punch him while his hands are down. You can depend on that. But I'll make him put them up!"

"Great scissors!" muttered Manny in McKeowan's ear. "The little shrimp's mad clean to the bone."

"And when they get that way," was the low-spoken response, "nothing but a thorough beating will bring 'em to their senses. We'll have to let him take his medicine."

Even Courtney felt that it would be useless to try to restrain Stone in his present mood. All three were as sure as they were sure of anything in the world that Pebble was due to bring upon himself further and severer punishment. So they shed their working togs, got into street clothes, and accompanied the shortstop to the hotel. Before the hotel was reached Courtney, hoping that the man would cool down if given time, succeeded in extracting a promise from Stone that he would not start anything until after dinner.

In the lobby they parted to get ready for dinner, but the center fielder was waiting for Pebble when he appeared again. During the meal Courtney was by far the more nervous of the two. Stone carried himself with an air of calm indifference that made the veteran wonder if he had not

wisely thought better of his vengeful design. He ate leisurely, with every appearance of appetite, though his companion observed that he was rather more sparing than usual. Only once did the older man attempt to refer to the disagreeable topic. With perfect good humor, but with a finality which was unmistakable, Pebble dismissed the subject; and Courtney, made aware that he had by no means abandoned his purpose, turned his thoughts to plans for reducing the shortstop's inevitable punishment to a minimum.

After the meal, Stone talked with the hotel manager for a few minutes. When he rejoined Courtney his eyes were bright and his manner brisk. "Well, suppose we hunt up our accomplished friend," he said. "I thought I saw him enter the writing room a few minutes ago."

"Classy" Robinson was there at one of the desks, though not writing. His expression sullen and ill-tempered, he lounged on a chair, talking with two other players. Followed by Courtney and Tug Manny—the latter, on the alert for trouble, had joined them at the door of the writing room—Pebble walked deliberately to the desk and paused, his hands thrust into the pockets of his coat.

"Boasting of your latest pugilistic triumph?"

he inquired blandly, but with a distinctly scornful undercurrent in his voice.

Classy gave him a disdainful look. "Hardly," he sneered. "It wasn't worth mentioning."

"That's right," agreed Stone. "It was such a contemptibly low trick that I can imagine even you feeling ashamed of it. You slugged me when I wasn't prepared, and in return I propose to give myself another chance. I've secured a set of five-ounce gloves and hired a private room upstairs where we can put them on and settle our little disagreement without any chance of interruption."

Robinson stared. Then he laughed harshly. "Put on the gloves with you!" he scoffed. "Why, you poor, undersized scrub! I wouldn't waste my time boxing with a half-baked kid."

"You won't have to waste much time, Robinson," returned Pebble. "It shouldn't take more than five or ten minutes, at most. And you've simply got to fight, for I'll resort to any means to compel you, even though I know you're naturally a white-livered coward."

With a snarl, Robinson rose to his feet, his fists clenched. That his attack on Stone in the club-house was a mistake had already been effectually borne home by the chilly attitude of the men whose favor he desired so keenly, and he did not mean to

repeat the error. Nevertheless, with fingers itching to lay hold of his insolent tormentor, it took every particle of will power he possessed to restrain himself.

"You poor fool!" he rasped. "I could beat your head off in one round, but I've had trouble enough already on your account. Chase yourself, before you get hurt."

"You won't fight?" persisted Pebble in an oddly harsh voice.

"Not with you!" snapped Classy. "But in about one minute I'll turn you over my knee and spank you."

The shortstop's hand shot out, plucked an inkwell from the desk, and dashed the contents into Robinson's face. The flood of black liquid splashed over his mouth, and chin, and collar, and dripped in great, disfiguring blotches upon his immaculate clothes.

With a roar, Robinson sprang blindly forward, seeking to reach his enemy. One of his friends grabbed him from behind; and Courtney, thrusting Pebble swiftly aside, stopped the fellow's rush with his own big bulk.

"Not here!" he said sharply. "As long as this has got to come off, it's going to be done right."

"You—you—" gasped the infuriated man chok-

ingly. Suddenly he seemed to pull himself together, and, producing a handkerchief, began to wipe his face. "Where's—that private room?" he panted.

CHAPTER XXXIV

THE FIGHT

AUGMENTED by McKeown and Smoke Jordan, picked up in the lobby, the party filed quietly into the private dining room and stood round while the bell boy switched on lights. There were sponges and towels in the room, two pitchers of water, and on the table lay a set of light boxing gloves. Stone had persuaded the good-humored hotel manager to have everything ready.

Courtney, who had quietly assumed the position of director, quickly dismissed the boy with a tip, and closed the door. At the click of the key in the lock, Robinson, still breathing a bit unevenly, flung off coat and waistcoat, and jerked at his collar with fingers that were shaking. His face, grotesquely streaked with ink, wore an expression of fierce, consuming eagerness.

The room was cleared and a ring indicated by placing a good-sized square rug in the center of the thick carpet. It was to be a regular bout, by

rounds, with a referee and timekeepers. The veteran fielder insisted on that, thinking thus to save Stone, in a measure, the severe punishment he would be sure to receive in a straight fight to a finish.

"There'll be no fouling, either," he said in an undertone to Manny. "I won't stand for that. If the kid begins to get too badly beaten up, we'll find some pretext to stop it."

He felt sure that such interference would be necessary to save the shortstop from the consequences of his folly. Courtney was something of a boxer himself and knew the real stuff when he saw it: Pebble might be able to spar a little, but he stood no chance against the fellow who had outpointed Bat McCarty.

When the combatants stood forth, stripped to the waist, the five-ounce gloves fastened on their hands, the contrast was even more depressing. Compared with Robinson's bulk and brawn and look of latent power, Pebble seemed undersized, almost underdeveloped.

Neither man offered to shake hands. While the self-appointed referee announced the simple rules, they eyed each other from opposite corners of the rug; Stone cool and half smiling, but with a touch of hardness about the mouth and chin; Robinson

black as a thundercloud and quivering with eagerness to begin.

"Peb's got just one chance," thought Courtney, as he stepped back. "Classy's so mad he may help to lick himself."

For a space it looked as if this might come true. At the word, Classy leaped forward as if shot from a catapult. To the onlookers it seemed that he meant to beat down his opponent by a whirlwind rush. He drove Stone across the rug in a twinkling. On the farther edge, just as the men taking the place of the rope were about to thrust Stone back, he side-stepped, ducking a swing, and footed it to the center of the ring. Robinson whirled and followed up, still rushing; but this time, as he dodged, Stone landed a short-arm jolt on his ribs which made the man grunt.

Courtney's eyes opened a little. "That jarred him," he thought. "The kid's cool as zero weather. If Robinson keeps that up—"

Classy did not keep it up. The shock of that blow seemed like a douche of cold water to his maddened spirit. The impulsive fury of his attack suddenly ceased; with a lithe, springy tread he followed Stone closely. A look of disappointment came into Courtney's eyes. Robinson's sudden shift to the cool, brainy restraint of the trained

fighter made the final outcome a foregone conclusion.

For some seconds the two men felt for each other, feinting, parrying, blocking, turning slowly, their gloves sparring together now and then. Suddenly the larger man feinted swiftly with his right, there was a lightning exchange of thudding blows, guarded or blocked, the pad of stockinged feet muffled by the soft rug, and, last of all, the flash of Pebble ducking swiftly out of danger.

Following every movement, shifting his position as the fighters shifted, Courtney found his pulse beating a little unevenly, and was conscious of a slight dryness in his throat. Twice he had seen Pebble block punches he was doubtful that he himself could have stopped. The smaller man must have much more science than he had supposed. But if he knew how to fight, why didn't he take the offensive, instead of using up his energy in ducking, dodging, and unnecessary foot-work?

As the round progressed, Courtney asked himself that question more than once. Pebble continued his defensive tactics, scarcely once getting in a really effective blow. As pure defense, it was an almost brilliant exhibition; that was just what

puzzled the outfielder. With such uncommon ability for evading punishment, it was difficult to imagine him lacking the power to administer a little of it. Why didn't he start in?

Once the referee felt sure that the time had come. Feinting cleverly, Robinson suddenly launched a swing at Stone's jaw, which, if it had landed squarely, would have ended the fight. Stone dodged, but the punch struck glancingly, knocking him backward, to fall momentarily on one knee.

He was up again like a flash; like a flash he flung himself at his opponent, his eyes blazing wrathfully. Then, as if a brake had been jammed on, he stopped and waited calmly for the other man. A few seconds later the finish of the round found him dexterously slipping out of the corner into which Classy had driven him. He was amazingly serene.

"What are you trying to do?" demanded Courtney, in a low tone, while Manny busied himself over Stone with water and a flapping towel. "Why don't you get after him?"

Pebble smiled enigmatically. "No hurry. There's time to burn. Let him wear himself down a little more—"

Whether or not these words were intended for

Robinson's ears, the man, who had refused McKeown's attentions with the towel and water pitcher, heard them plainly. Again he blazed like torch-touched tinder.

"So that's what you're trying to work, you little brat!" he almost shouted. "Well, you're going to get yours right away. You won't put on the gloves again in a hurry, believe me!"

Stone's lips twitched as he gave Courtney a glance. "You see?" he whispered.

In a flash of comprehension, the older man understood, and wondered why it had not come to him before. Not only had Pebble been feeling out his opponent, gauging his style, fathoming his strength and weakness, but he had also worked deliberately to give a false impression of his ability and to lead Classy into believing he was delaying in order to get an advantage in that way. Courtney knew something of psychology and human emotion, and he felt a touch of admiration for Pebble's methods. Whether or not they would profit him remained to be seen.

The second round started with a rush. Robinson had plainly made up his mind to put a stop to his opponent's elusive tactics and bring matters to a head without delay. As before, Pebble retreated from his advance until backed into a cor-

ner. For an instant, Courtney had a sinking fear that his friend had dallied too long with fortune. Then something happened.

Before Robinson could land a blow, two lightning, unexpected lefts reached his head. His guard went up, and a right jab in the wind made him gasp with mingled surprise and pain, lurching into a clinch.

"Just opening up my samples," murmured Pebble in his ear. "There are more in the same package."

"Break!" ordered Courtney, forcing them apart.

Stone quickly obeyed, but Robinson, shaking his head like an angry bull, promptly rushed at his antagonist again. Pebble met him this time, stepping inside the wild swing, and searching out the fellow's left eye with a punch which had all the power in his wiry, well-built body behind it. It was a blow which even Buck Dyer, his instructor back in the old Slugger days, would have approved.

"One," counted Stone pleasantly.

Then Robinson lost himself completely. The pain, the shock, the humiliation, above all the dazzling realization of the trick which had been played upon him, swept away the last shadow of his self-restraint. He charged again and again, blindly.

Time after time he seemed to have the little short-stop cornered, but always Stone eluded him at the last moment, ducking, side-stepping, jerking his head out of danger. And all the while he was cutting the man to pieces with a hail of stinging jabs in the face. Panting, snarling, staggering, Robinson fought on, making swings which were pitifully wild and useless. The blind rushes and frantic efforts to get his man were exhausting his wind and strength. His movements became slower, heavier; he breathed wheezingly through open, swollen lips.

"I'm afraid you're about all in," commented Pebble, with mock commiseration. "The other lamp needs attention, though. It would be a pity to leave your eyes mismated, so I think I'll—"

He broke off abruptly in the very act of driving through the other's futile guard. A curious transformation came over his face. The light of revengeful laughter vanished from his eyes, leaving them full of an odd self-contempt. He stared at the puffed, bruised, battered countenance before him, something like shame written on his face. Then, with the sudden, nervous haste of one wishing to banish a distasteful spectacle, he leaped forward like a tiger, sending his right smashing to the big man's heart.

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Robinson went down. Even as the man's body struck the floor, Stone turned and thrust out both hands to Manny.

"Take 'em off, Tug," he said, eying the gloves disgustedly.

CHAPTER XXXV

SOLD OUT

AS Tug Manny expressed it, Robinson had been "bidding for a black eye for weeks," and, recovering from his qualms following the fight, Stone experienced a grim sort of pleasure at having been the means of giving him what he was after. Even Manager Frazer's wrath at the discovery that his third baseman would be out of the game for a day, at least, failed to disturb the young recruit. With Vedder still under the weather, and Classy laid up, Frazer was practically forced to use the new shortstop.

During the remaining games of the series Stone was very much in evidence. His playing showed distinct improvement. Even though encouragement from Frazer was lacking, Pebble knew he had done well. Courtney and Manny told him so; likewise his own intuitive sense of good and bad work. Marked interest in his performance was displayed by Donahue, the White Wings' manager.

So he began to feel sure that at last his feet were set on the right path.

This feeling of assurance was short-lived, however. The opening game with the Blue Stockings saw Vedder back on the field and Stone again warming the bench. Robinson, since his brief lay-off, was silent and morose under the cold indifference of the men whose friendship he had tried so hard to cultivate. Stone he utterly ignored, much to the latter's satisfaction. With the swinging of the club round the circuit, the shortstop's tiresome vigil on the bench continued uninterrupted, and was hard enough to bear patiently without the addition of the irritating patronage Classy had been wont to give him. So Robinson's partial disgrace gave no little comfort to the man who had brought it about.

During his inaction, Pebble had time to think of another matter, which, in the stress of his battle for a place on the team, had been temporarily crowded out of his mind. How did he know that Hermia Meredith was really betrothed to Robinson? That they were on friendly terms, he knew; though he had seen nothing of Hermia for months, Laura Reid and others did not fail to keep Stone posted. In all this time, however, no engagement between Robinson and Hermia had been

announced, and if there was reason for secrecy, Stone could not see it. Suppose, instead of giving up, he persisted in the face of seeming obstacles, might he not have a fighting chance? Was it too late? The more he thought of it, the more Stone blamed himself for his finical aloofness. Knowing the man as he did, he had no right to stand back and let things take their course. At last he decided that as soon as he was back home he would seek out Hermia and do his best to place their friendship on its old footing.

The planning of a campaign which held not a few difficult features helped considerably to relieve the tedium of his daily life. It helped, also, to crush back the worries that assailed him as the rumors of a new infielder crystallized into definite statements. From several sources came the positive announcement that Ben Frazer had bought Buck Loutrel, a clever youngster, who had been farmed out by the Specters to an International club. It was said that Loutrel would join the Wolves within a fortnight of their return home. To Pebble this meant but one thing—his own finish with the club. Frazer's persistent failure to give him a chance, and a dozen other details of the manager's treatment of him, pointed to the conclusion that the little shortstop was un-

acceptable. But why? How could any man make good when he was denied a fair chance? What had Frazer against him to bring out the antagonism he had shown from the very first? Pebble could not answer it, nor could his father when the son put the question to him impulsively the evening of that first night at home. In fact, the older man's whole attitude was vaguely disappointing to the son, who would have been grateful just then for a touch of sympathy. He got the impression that old Blister was tired and disgusted with it all, and beginning to lose faith. This thought stung even more than anything else.

As if to cap the climax, before he could get to see Miss Meredith, he met her on the street, and her freezing formality and polite but utterly indifferent attitude toward him and his doings were like a slap in the face. He could not bring himself to ask if he might call. He was chilled through and through, and made to feel that nothing he might ever say or do would be of any real interest to her.

After the first shock of disappointment had passed, Pebble began to feel a dull anger surging up within him. It was not inspired by the girl or any other special individual, but rather was a rebellious protest against the unfairness of those

blows fate had been dealing him in such swift succession.

Without caring whether it was early or not, he swung himself on a car and rode out to the ball park. He might as well be there as walking the streets aimlessly, thinking of his troubles. The White Wings were commencing a return engagement that day, but he had received no notification to play. His lips curled a little. It wouldn't have hurt Frazer to put him in against this tail-end club, which could scarcely gain a victory unless it was handed out on a platter.

Entering the clubhouse, he turned toward the locker room. Before he reached it, the voice of Chalm Robinson, raised in anger, made him pause. In his present mood the mere sight of Classy was to be avoided whenever possible.

"And that goes!" announced the third baseman harshly. "You don't get a red cent out of me, and if I catch you around here again there'll be trouble."

There was no reply, but a moment later a slim young man, somewhat shabbily dressed, appeared in the corridor and hastened toward the entrance. Stone eyed him rather curiously, half tempted to stop him and offer the aid Robinson had so roughly refused. But the stranger, after a single

furtive glance, dropped his eyes and hurried on. He had disappeared into the street before Pebble's mind was made up. With a shrug, the shortstop glanced into the locker room, observed that Robinson was the sole occupant, and strolled aimlessly out to the field.

His interest in the game that day was languid. The White Wings played with their customary mediocrity, and Stone let his mind drift into other channels. He did not leave the bench until the game was over. Halfway across the field he ran into Bunk Hoskins, the opposing backstop and cousin of the manager, with whom he had exchanged rather more than the usual amount of josh during the previous series.

"Hello!" cried Hoskins cheerfully. "Just wondering where you were keeping yourself. Giving old pipestems a chance to-day, eh?"

"Sure; he needs the practice," returned Pebble.

Hoskins grinned and fell into step. "Reckon Frazer must be saving you for us!" He chuckled. "Real thoughtful of him, ain't it?"

Pebble regarded him blankly. "For you!" he exclaimed in a puzzled tone.

"Sure," affirmed the catcher. "Don't do the baby stare. I'm hep to the business, all right. Jim don't keep much from me, and he said to-day

that his offer for you had been accepted, so you'll be one of the happy family pretty quick."

Stone's glove slipped from his fingers, and he bent swiftly to recover it. When he straightened up a touch of color showed beneath his tan. "Oh, you mean that!" he said briefly. "I didn't get you at first. You are talking about Donahue's—buying me for—the White Wings?"

"What else?" said Hoskins. "Say," he went on curiously, "what's the trouble with Frazer, anyhow? Why's he letting you go this way?"

Stone made some sort of reply—just what, he couldn't afterward remember. They had reached the clubhouse, and he had a feeling that he must get away from his companion at once. He added something vague about being in a hurry, and, to his relief, Hoskins turned away.

"Well, see you soon," said the latter. He hesitated and glanced back over his shoulder. "Hard luck for you, kid, being sent to this graveyard," he commented with grim frankness. "But maybe you'll inject a little life into the dead ones."

CHAPTER XXXVI

STOLEN SIGNALS

STONE hustled into his street clothes and slipped away. He was too angry to talk to any one just then, even Courtney, and the moment he was out of sight of prying eyes and receptive ears his rage burst forth. "A graveyard," Bunk had called it. He was right; that was exactly what it was—the graveyard of Pebble's hopes. For Frazer to sell him to this team of rank losers who seemed to fight persistently for the tail-end position was humiliation indeed. Throughout the league existed a deeply grounded belief that the White Wings were hoodooed. Once on that team, players seemed fated never to come back to better company. Other managers never wanted them because of the ill luck which was supposed to follow them individually as well as collectively. The only way of escape was down to the minors.

But Stone was utterly helpless, bound hard and fast as any slave by the contract he had signed.

He might refuse to go to the White Wings, but that would mean the finish of his career in organized baseball. Without the consent of Donahue, no manager could employ him. For a space he was so wrought up that he seriously considered giving up the game. Presently his healthy, normal outlook on life returned, bringing with it even a touch of optimism. To give up now would be the act of a coward. Besides, he didn't really want to; the lure was too great. How did he know that he was definitely doomed? That hoodoo talk was only a superstition. What was to prevent his smashing it? If he made a sufficiently brilliant showing, surely some manager would arise with courage enough to take him, even from the White Wings.

It was in this frame of mind that he took his usual place on the bench the next afternoon. For six innings he followed the progress of the game perfunctorily. The visitors seemed to be in rather better form than usual, but nevertheless their column of the score board presented a series of neat zeros against a comfortable total of six runs bagged by the home team. Then, in the first of the seventh, Stone was suddenly galvanized by the spectacle of them beginning to hit. He could scarcely believe his eyes. The first batter

fanned, but the second reached first on Vedder's error. The man who followed, however, connected with one of Jordan's benders and dropped it neatly over Cottrell's head. His successor duplicated the bingle, and before the surprised Wolves could end the inning three men had crossed the rubber. In the eighth the White Wings added two more to the score. In the ninth, helped not a little by Vedder's slowness, they actually forced four men across the plate. The Wolves came up to the scratch and did some nice hitting of their own, but a single tally was all that intervened between them and defeat. Luckily the White Wings had rallied late in the game.

The rush and snap of this unexpected finish took Stone completely out of himself. Vedder had managed to finish the inning, but it seemed that he had gone to pieces completely, as if this was the breakdown every one apparently, except Frazer, had been expecting. Pebble was not surprised to receive a curt notification that he was to take the veteran's place for the next game, at least.

He welcomed this with carefully concealed, but none the less vehement, eagerness. Besides a very human hope that he might give an exhibition which would show up the manager's bad judg-

ment in letting him go, the shortstop was anxious to play for another reason. His interest had been aroused by that surprising hitting rally. He had a suspicion, which he was keen to verify, that it had been caused by the visitors' stealing the Wolves' signals. He wasn't sure. The swing of an arm by a runner on second, an unnatural attitude struck by a White Wing on first, together with the suspicious ease with which the batters had suddenly begun to hit Smoke Jordan, was the foundation of his belief. But when the third game of the series opened with the performance repeating itself, and the visitors finding Chick O'Brien as often as they had his predecessor, suspicion became certainty.

"They're wise to the signals, Chick," Stone declared, when the home team had gathered on the bench. "When they can do it, they're tipping the batters off to every ball you put over."

The pitcher stared, then brought his fist down on one knee. "By cripes!" he exclaimed. "You've hit it, Peb! I knew that bunch was getting away with something funny, but I hadn't doped out what it was. We'll put the kibosh on that. Biff, you'll have to give me the signs so they can't see 'em."

"It can't be done with runners on first and

second both," growled Biff Callahan. "We'd better change the signals. That's the proper thing to do."

"I know something that beats that," put in Pebble suddenly. "Why not hand 'em the double cross? Your idea would work all right when there's only one on, Chick, but when two sacks are covered, how would this do: Suppose Biff calls for a curve, and it's repeated to the batter by one of their runners; the minute I see him signal I'll sing out, 'Fan him, Chick,' or something like that, which will mean that you're to put over a straight ball instead of a curve. Something else would mean a different shift—we wouldn't need a whole lot—and soon we'd have those dubs so they wouldn't know whether they were afoot or horseback. With everybody coaching, they wouldn't wise up in a thousand years that I was the only one you paid any attention to." His face glowed with eager enthusiasm. He was thinking only of the team and of thwarting their opponents who had tried to put something over on them. He had forgotten that he had been sold; that he would soon be one of the very club he was working against.

The veteran pitcher regarded him with astonishment and admiration. "Some scheme, Peb-

ble!" he chuckled. "It might work. How about it, Ben?"

The manager, who had been listening in silence, nodded his approval. "Try it," he said.

Forthwith a simple code of counter signals was agreed on and memorized. It worked to a charm. The first White Wing batter reached the sack by a sharp crack to left field. It was evident from the close watch he kept on Biff Callahan that he sought to catch the latter's signal, but Biff, crouching, turned his body toward third, making the sign behind his knee in a manner that effectively foiled the attempt.

The next hitter, in spite of the yells of the entire infield, excepting Pebble, for Chick O'Brien to take him into camp laid down a clever bunt along the third-base line and managed to beat the throw by a hair. This was the situation for which preparations had been made. Bat made no attempt to conceal his signal now. He called for an outdrop, and the runner, dancing away from second, made a curious sweeping round and downward movement with his arm which brought the shortstop instantly into the play.

"Fan him, Chick!" Stone shrilled, his voice sounding clear above the admonitions of the other coachers.

The ball that came over was a swift one in the groove. It passed over the sharply swung hickory, almost grazing the shirt of the batter, who had stepped forward to make sure of the curve he thought was coming. Callahan caught it in perfect throwing position, and lined it to Robinson in time to get the runner coming confidently up from second. The shock of it seemed to rattle the batter so much that he whiffed a few seconds later without touching the sphere in three swings.

Still the White Wings were undismayed. The misfortune might easily be the result of a mistake which ought not to happen again. The unfortunate who had transferred the signal was raked over the coals by the entire team for blundering, and the visitors were ready to try again. But they were soon totally at sea. The catcher's signals had become absolutely incomprehensible. At one time two fingers placed against the mitt seemed to mean a curve; at another time a straight ball followed the same signal. Amid the calls of the coachers which preceded every ball pitched by O'Brien, Stone's warning note passed unheeded. The effective hitting of the White Wings lapsed suddenly. They had scored two runs in the first inning, and that remained the

sum total of their tallies, while their opponents piled up a full baker's dozen.

Pebble was still grinning reminiscently as he walked through the crowd toward the clubhouse when a hand smote his shoulder, almost staggering him.

"Well, son," sounded a familiar voice, "you moved right up into the king row, didn't you?" It was James J. Kelley, his old manager of the Slugger days, and, with a cry of delight, Pebble fell on him and began pumping his arm up and down.

"Well, for the love of marvels!" he exclaimed. "Where did you fall from?"

Kelley's eyes twinkled. "Oh, I just happened to be in town, and thought I'd drop in and see a shortstop I owned once make a show of himself."

"You got your wish," said Pebble, taking the older man by the arm. "Come in while I change. I want to hear all about everything. Say," he added, as the thought struck him, "how can you run off and leave your team like this? Not out of a job, are you?"

"Nothing like it," returned James J., with a comfortable chuckle. "My job's all to the mustard, son. I got kinda tired, though, so I found

me an understudy and hiked down here for a week."

Running off and leaving his team in midseason for so trivial a reason didn't seem quite like Jim Kelley, but Stone reflected that it was none of his business, and dropped the subject. At least, the ex-Big Leaguer was here, and, particularly at the present juncture, Pebble was glad to see him. With his shrewd common sense and comfortable optimism, the bush manager was a very good counselor, and, whether or not Pebble decided to confide all of his troubles to his old friend, the mere talking over of some of them would be a relief. But first he wanted to hear all about the old team, and the process of dressing, punctuated as it was by many questions, lagged perceptibly. In fact, even before James J. began a little gentle probing on his own account the bunch in the locker room was thinning out. When they started for the street, twenty minutes or so later, they had the place to themselves.

At least, they thought so, until they approached the private office of Manager Frazer. Stone was coming to the end of a brief narration of his Big League experiences, omitting only the humiliating fact of his sale to the White Wings, which somehow he couldn't bring himself to discuss even with

Kelley, when the sound of Frazer's angry, cutting voice coming from beyond the door that was not quite closed made him pause instinctively.

"I refuse, and that's all there is to it, Beatty!" Frazer snapped. "I've given in to your whims for the last time."

"Lord Harry!" came in the club owner's familiar, blatant roar. "You've got a nerve, Frazer. I'm boss here; don't think I ain't! My judgment goes."

"Your judgment!" sneered the manager. "You haven't any. You're putting the whole bunch in Dutch with your persistent interference. You boost a fellow like Robinson and turn down young Stone, who's worth two of him. I've stood your butting in till it's got my goat. I've got my own reputation to think of, and henceforth I propose to be manager as long as I carry the title."

"Which won't be a great while!" shouted Beatty. "Any employé of mine has to obey orders."

"Meaning?" shot back Frazer.

"You can look for another job."

"Oh, can I?" The manager's voice was cool. "Fire me and I'll bring suit for the full term of my contract, which runs another year. Put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

Rousing himself, the astonished shortstop grasped Kelley by the arm and hurried him forth into the street, not wishing to play the eavesdropper. Outside they paused and regarded one another with questioning eyes.

"Well, what do you know about that?" breathed Pebble at last.

"Something doing," returned James J. "Looks like you'd been barking up the wrong tree, son. Evidently it's Jake Beatty who's been holding you down, not Frazer."

CHAPTER XXXVII

THE SECOND FORGERY

HERE could be no doubt about it; Beatty, not Frazer, had been the cause of Stone's slow progress. The manager's apparent coldness had been assumed to save his face—the defense of a man maintaining his dignity and outward seeming of full authority. But why hadn't his rebellion come sooner? Pebble asked himself. Why hadn't Frazer taken that determined stand before submitting, against his better judgment, to the shortstop's sale? The thought of what might have been so irritated Stone that he presently found himself replying vaguely and at random to something Kelley had said. He pulled himself together, but he was not altogether sorry when James J. declined his invitation to come home with him for dinner. He had seen old Blister that morning, Kelley said, and had an engagement for the evening. He would be out at the ball park next day. After what they had just overheard, there might be something doing, and he wanted to be among those present.

To Pebble's surprise, and, somewhat to his disappointment, nothing happened the next day. Though Mrs. Beatty occupied her usual place in a lower box, her husband did not show up at all. It seemed odd; surely he hadn't given in already! It did not occur to Stone that Frazer might have abandoned his stand. There was a noticeable briskness in the manager's manner, a snap and vigor in his movements, a stubborn set to his chin, and a glint in his eyes, which seemed to indicate unwavering purpose. Was it simply an armed truce, or had the arrogant Beatty been vanquished?

His interest in the affair did not prevent Pebble from putting up a fine game at short. The battery was working with a new signal code that morning, and their opponents, bereft of the advantage which had helped them for a time, made a poor showing. Once or twice Pebble glanced expectantly toward the owner's box, but through the afternoon Mrs. Beatty and a woman friend remained the only occupants. After the game both women rose to slip on their dust coats, and in the operation one of Mrs. Beatty's gloves fell off the rail at a moment when Stone and Larry Cottrell were passing. The shortstop promptly stepped forward and restored the glove, with a

little bow. In return he got a freezing, formal "thanks," accompanied by a glance of such unmistakable dislike that it almost took away his breath.

"Whew!" he murmured, rejoining Cottrell. "Lead me to an overcoat! What does this frost mean? I never even spoke to the lady before."

"You didn't have to," chuckled Cottrell. "What you put over Robinson was enough to make her hate your homely mug forever."

"Robinson?" echoed Stone. "I don't get you, Larry. What does she care about him? Why, he hasn't any use for her at all."

"Hasn't he?" chuckled the first baseman. "Come again, Peb! They're regular old friends."

Having in mind Robinson's sarcastic comment about the lady on the day of the opening game, Stone was incredulous.

"You're the real doubting Thomas," said Cottrell good-humoredly. "Listen. I'll say it slow, so you won't miss any. Mrs. Beatty has got a younger sister who's a queen. About two years ago, Classy proposed to her, and was turned down. Mrs. Beatty didn't happen to agree with her; said she was a little fool for not taking a nice chap like that. She didn't lose any time letting Robinson

see she was sorry for him. You don't suppose he'd pass up a snap like that, do you? He's got her to believing the sun rises and sets in him. She thinks the team would go plumb to blazes without him on third; so there he stays."

"But how do you know—"

"The sister married a man who is a friend of mine," explained Cottrell, "so I get the dope straight. Pretty soft for Classy, hey? I wouldn't mind having it easy like that myself."

"But how about Beatty?" asked Stone doubtfully, as they entered the clubhouse.

"She can twist him around her finger," said Larry, making for his locker.

Pebble followed slowly, dazzled by the sudden light which had come to him. At last he had the explanation of everything which had fretted and exasperated him since the opening of the season. Beatty wasn't against him, nor was his wife; it was Robinson, working through the latter to thwart and hinder him. Classy cared nothing for the woman; he simply worked the friendship for what there was in it, both for his own advancement and the downfall of the man he hated. It was really he who had sold Pebble to the White Wings!

In his wrath Stone was gripped by the impulse

to have it out with the scoundrel at once. But Robinson was not in sight. Some one said he had departed in a hurry not three minutes before, and Stone, gulping down his rage, returned to his dressing. After all, what could he do? He might give Classy another thumping, but that sort of revenge seemed crude and futile. It would be much better to open Mrs. Beatty's eyes to the real character of the man, but he knew enough of women to realize the impossibility of such a step. She would refuse to believe anything wrong of her favorite, and Pebble would do himself further damage, if that were possible.

At the breakfast table next morning he got another jolt. He came down late to find that old Blister had departed. After a few words with his mother, he unfolded the morning paper. Almost the first thing his eyes rested on was a bold heading in the upper left-hand corner of the front page:

BASEBALL MAGNATE'S NAME FORGED.
Crook Gets Away With \$500 by Clever Imitation
of Jake Beatty's Signature.

Pebble hastily delved into the small print beneath the capitals. It appeared that, toward noon the day before, a young man, slim, brisk, and con-

fident, with the tanned face and general look of an athlete, had presented himself at Beatty's own bank with a letter of introduction from the club owner to the second vice president. From his cage the presiding teller watched him approach the official and present the letter, saw him greeted warmly, and seated beside the vice president's desk. Five minutes later he appeared before the teller's window with a check for five hundred, signed by Beatty, and bearing the bank official's familiar "O.K." under the indorsement. It all seemed perfectly in order, and, while the teller was counting out the bills, the young man informed him casually that he had been sold to the White Wings and that the money was his percentage of the selling price. The teller was no baseball fan and knew nothing about players. Having received the money, the youth departed leisurely. Two hours later a chance inquiry revealed the fact that the vice president had never seen the check, much less affixed his initials. The letter merely introduced a certain "John Temple," who desired to open an account with the trust company in the near future. There had been an exchange of pleasant words, and an invitation for the prospective depositor to call again whenever he was ready for business; that was all.

Pebble drew a long breath. It had been cleverly put across. Even had the teller been a baseball enthusiast, he would probably have fallen for it just the same; for there was a real John Temple, a young pitcher who had actually been sold to the White Wings two days before.

Reaching the concluding paragraph, Pebble suddenly stiffened, gripping the rustling sheet tighter, and muttered an exclamation of startled bewilderment. The printed description of the forger, minute and lengthy, tallied with his own to the smallest detail.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

THE WOMAN IN THE DOORWAY

PEBBLE went over that paragraph more slowly. It was all there, color of eyes and hair, complexion, height, build—everything; he could not better have described himself, bit by bit, from his image in the glass. For some minutes he sat frowning at the paper. Suddenly he straightened up, his face flaming. Could this be the explanation of Mrs. Beatty's hostile look? She must have heard of the linking of his name with that minor forgery down at the training camp. Had she, womanlike, jumped to the conclusion that he was concerned in this affair?

With a muttered exclamation, Pebble rose hastily, heedless of his mother's surprised question, and hurried from the room. His leading impulse was to call up Beatty and find out if he was suspected, but before he reached the instrument in the library he decided to talk with Frazer first. Unfortunately the manager was not at home. He had left fifteen minutes before, his wife said—

for the ball park, she presumed. It was far too early for morning practice; but, with no other clew, Pebble followed this one up. Without waiting to finish breakfast, he hurried out and caught a car. A few minutes after nine he jumped off at the grounds.

A taxi standing before the private entrance caught his eye at once, and his mind instantly conceived the possibility of a conference of some sort between Beatty and Ben Frazer. A second later he realized that there was some one in the cab. His eyes widened with surprise as they rested on the piquant face of Mrs. Bertram, Hermia Meredith's married sister. Hermia herself occupied the other seat.

Mechanically, Stone raised his hat, hesitated a second, and would have passed on had not the young matron called to him.

"Mr. Stone," she said, with a touch of petulance, "have you seen anything of Mr. Robinson?"

Stifling his impatience, the shortstop stepped to the taxi, hat in hand.

"Not this morning, Mrs. Bertram," he answered. "You were looking for him?"

"Looking for him!" she echoed, in a tone of distinct annoyance. "It ought to be the other way. He's been wanting Hermia and me to look

over your clubhouse, and after the game yesterday he arranged to be here at a quarter before nine to show us about before any of the team came. We've been sitting here nearly half an hour, and I certainly don't care to wait much longer."

Pebble hesitated. It was evidently up to him. His glance shifted for an instant to the younger girl. She sat in the farther corner, her hands folded in her lap, her eyes fixed straight ahead in an attitude of indifference which was somewhat belied by the set of her lips and the touch of color in her face. Whether she was angry at Robinson's delinquency, or annoyed by Stone's unexpected appearance, it was not easy to tell. Suddenly conscious, however, of a desire to do what a moment before had seemed a bore, Pebble turned again to the older woman.

"Probably he's been unexpectedly detained," he said, smiling. "He may turn up at any minute. I'd be delighted, Mrs. Bertram, to show you around until he comes."

Miss Meredith made a move. "It isn't at all necessary to trouble Mr. Stone, Edith," she said hastily. "It would be much better to make some other arrangement—"

"How absurd you are, Hermia!" interrupted her sister. "We're here, and I've always wanted

to see the place. Besides, I don't believe it will be much trouble to Mr. Stone. Will it?"

"It will be a great pleasure," answered Pebble, opening the cab door.

Helping them out, he escorted them into the clubhouse. The place, so far as he could tell, was empty save for an attendant or two. Frazer's door was open, but no sound issued forth. Evidently he had not yet arrived, and Pebble could assume the rôle of guide with a free mind. With every modern convenience, after the latest pattern, the place was a marvel of comfort and beauty, and the manager always insisted on order and neatness. Mrs. Bertram was greatly interested. Her sister made almost no comment, but hurried through the rooms, scarcely looking at anything and plainly impatient to get away.

"It's better than I thought," said the young matron as they paused in the locker room. "I never imagined you had all these luxuries. Those showers—I really must—"

The slamming of a door made her pause and glance expectantly into the corridor. There was a sound of hurried steps, and Robinson entered. The sight of Pebble made him frown, but his expression swiftly changed to one of regret as he turned to the ladies.

"I can't tell you how sorry I am!" he exclaimed in a low tone. "I wouldn't have had this happen for anything, but I was detained unexpectedly by—er—"

"Don't trouble to tax your invention," put in Mrs. Bertram briskly. "You probably overslept. I can't imagine anything else that would make a man keep two women waiting in the street for half an hour. Fortunately, Mr. Stone came to our rescue; otherwise you would not have been forgiven so quickly."

"I'm very glad," said Robinson, though the look he gave Pebble was far from grateful. "But surely you haven't seen everything!"

"Oh, but we have," returned Mrs. Bertram, evidently enjoying his discomfiture, and bent on adding to it if possible. "There's nothing left for you to do but take us out to the taxi. Thank you many times, Mr. Stone," she continued, smiling on Pebble. "Do come and see me soon. I haven't laid eyes on you for ages, except at games."

She held out her hand, and the shortstop took it, murmuring a polite acceptance of her invitation. She was turning away when a gleam of interest flashed into her eyes, and she faced him again. "Do tell me—I've been wanting to know

for days, yet I almost forgot to ask—who is the striking woman that comes to so many of the games and sits in a lower box just to the right of the reporters? She's a blonde and dresses wonderfully, and I'm curious to know if she isn't a celebrity."

"That's Mrs. Beatty, wife of the club owner," answered Pebble readily. "She rarely misses a game, but I have never met her."

"Do you know her, Mr. Robinson?" inquired Mrs. Bertram.

"Mrs. Beatty?" said Robinson lightly. "Oh, yes; but I've never admired peroxide beauties. She doesn't appeal to me very much."

Stone scarcely heard the last sentence, for his gaze, shifting from Robinson, was fixed in dismay on the startled, hurt, bewildered face of Mrs. Beatty herself, who had suddenly appeared in the open doorway.

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE BOOMERANG

AS the hurt look deepened in the woman's eyes and a flush crept up to lose itself in the shadow of her brilliant hair, Pebble himself reddened under his tan. He felt ashamed of being a mere witness to the affair.

It was Mrs. Beatty who broke the silence with a single stammered word:

“Why—”

With a little exclamation of surprise, Mrs. Bertram turned and stood motionless, her eyes wide but comprehending. Robinson had likewise whirled round. Seeing the woman in the doorway, he caught his breath, and his face crimsoned.

“Peroxide!” murmured Mrs. Beatty dazedly. “Why, you know—” She broke off abruptly, her color deepening. “So that's your real opinion of me!” she said unevenly. “And I thought—”

Robinson raised his head. There were little beads of moisture on his forehead. “Mrs. Beatty,” he stammered nervously, “one moment!

I—I— You mustn't think that—or—anything which may have seemed—”

“Don't trouble to apologize,” she interrupted coldly. “I heard!”

She had pulled herself together with amazing suddenness. Pebble watched her with open admiration. He had never thought so well of her as at this moment. A trace of the shock and hurt still lingered in her eyes, but otherwise she was entirely cool and self-restrained.

“I think I understand,” she said, almost indifferently. “You only wanted— Oh, well, it doesn't matter now.” She glanced back into the hallway, and raised her voice a little: “Jake, I haven't any more objections. Your friend may be right, after all,” she said.

Pebble regarded her curiously. What did she mean? Out in the corridor the tramp of feet seemed oddly to emphasize the stillness which had suddenly descended on the locker room. Pebble's eyes turned for an instant to Robinson, white-faced, tight-lipped staring intently at the door.

Beatty came in first, his fat face flushed and angry. Behind him, head down and nervous fingers interlaced, shuffled the shabby stranger whom Robinson had turned out of the clubhouse a few days before. Frazer brought up the rear,

but Stone scarcely saw him in his surprised recognition of a fourth man. It was impossible to mistake that square, clean-shaven face; the cold, light-gray eyes, the assured manner. It was the person who had secured his release from that absurd charge of forgery two years before—James Rollins, of the Bankers' Protective Association.

The shortstop's jaw sagged. It didn't seem possible that they could be after him for this latest forgery, yet—

“Why, that fellow's George, the Penman! I recognize him from—the newspaper pictures!”

Stone gave a start. It was not Rollins who had broken the silence, but Robinson, speaking in the shrill, jerky utterance of one whose nerves were jangling like taut wires. His face was white, and the accusing finger he pointed at the shabby stranger behind Jake Beatty shook a little.

“Yes!” said Rollins. “Well, what of it!”

“What of it!” repeated Classy sharply. “Don't you see that he must have pulled off the Beatty forgery yesterday? I—I know nothing about it except what was in the papers, but it has all the earmarks of his regular work.”

He spoke swiftly, almost wildly, as if he hardly realized what he was saying, but could not keep silent. Staring at him, Stone was conscious of an

odd, tingling suspense, such as a man might feel who watches, powerless, the sputtering fuse of a bomb.

"Yes," agreed Rollins, "the job had those earmarks. Why shouldn't it when it was carefully planned to show them?"

Robinson swallowed hard. "Planned? I don't understand," he stammered.

The detective ignored him and turned to Beatty. "It was cleverly worked out," he said. "This man is George, the Penman, but he didn't forge that check. It was done by some one who knew his methods perfectly and sought by careful imitation to throw the blame on him. After the check and letter of introduction were manufactured, the criminal picked out a crook accomplice to get the coin—a man that looked so much like the fellow who had been out of the pen less than two weeks that a printed description would be identical."

A sudden gleam of comprehension leaped into Pebble's eyes. He had been sizing up the young stranger who stood with drooping head, and at Rollins' words he realized in a flash the explanation of what had brought him here, hotfoot, to seek Frazer. A printed description may seem to fit identically two men who are only superficially alike, and that was what had happened in this

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case. The forger had Stone's height, and build, and coloring, but nobody, seeing them together, could ever mistake him for the ball player.

"It was a rather clever scheme," pursued the detective, "and it might have worked if the scoundrel hadn't overreached himself. He tried to kill two birds with one stone, and that's always difficult. He needed the money, and he wanted to get rid of a man who knew too much." He dropped one hand, not unkindly, on the shabby man's shoulder. "So, after he'd turned the trick, he came at night to George's room, told him what he'd done, and warned him to pull out. He even gave him ten dollars to get away on! Generous of him, wasn't it?" The detective grinned sneeringly; his voice hardened. "They happen to be brothers," he finished swiftly, with a glance of contempt at Classy. "The name is—Robinson!"

CHAPTER XL

THE END OF THE GAME

“**I**T’S a lie!” shouted Robinson—“a blackmailing slander!” He shook his fist wildly at the detective. “You’ve nothing but the word of a jailbird—a notorious crook who’s served two terms up the river. You haven’t a scrap of proof to back up this absurdity.”

“Haven’t I?” retorted Rollins coolly. “Where were you at nine-thirty last night?”

“In bed,” faltered Robinson. “I was tired, and went up before nine.”

“And slept till after eight this morning!” came in a whisper from behind Pebble.

He glanced round. Against the wall stood the two sisters: Mrs. Bertram, flushed, startled, her eyes brimming with amazed aversion; Miss Meredith rigid with a stony horror, her gaze fixed on Robinson.

“What’s the use, Chalm?” suddenly spoke up the slim young man. “Why don’t you take your medicine like a man? He’s got you cold. He

had a dictograph planted under the bureau, and was in the next room all the time."

"A dict—" The word seemed to choke Classy. His face turned livid as his panic-stricken eyes met those of the detective. A shiver ran over him.

"Correct," affirmed Rollins crisply. "When George, the Penman, alias Kid Robinson, got out two weeks ago I was pretty sure he'd be up to his old tricks directly, so I had him shadowed. When he landed in town and took a room on the East Side I hired the adjoining one, and installed a dictograph one day while he was out. It was under the bureau, with the wires running through a hole bored in the wall. There was always some one at the other end, either one of my assistants or myself. It's worth some trouble, you know, to nip these little stunts in the bud."

He was looking at Beatty now, seeming for the moment to ignore the pallid Robinson. "Up to yesterday I didn't get anything. When I was called in about the forgery I thought, of course, we'd slipped up some way, until I learned that my man was in his room at the time the check was cashed. Then I decided there must be an accomplice, and, if there was one, he'd probably show up that night. So I was on hand myself with one

of my men. When this fellow came in I got the surprise of my life. One minute of their talk told me that the two were brothers. Furthermore, your ball player here was responsible for George originally going to the bad—passed a check George had worked up for fun to see what he could do with his pen. When George came out this last time he'd decided to turn straight, and all he wanted was money to get to Frisco and live on until he could find a job. He asked his brother and got turned down hard. I suppose the man thought it was only the beginning of perpetual blackmail. Anyhow, he pulled off this trick, and then came to George, told him what he'd done—thinking he was perfectly safe, of course, without witness—and warned him to beat it and never come back. It's as nice a case as I've ever handled. He's tied himself up handsomely. He'll go up the river—”

“It's all a lie!” panted Robinson frantically. “I wasn't there at all! It was some one else you heard.”

Rollins turned on him. “Was it? Maybe it was some one else I saw leaving the room—your double, perhaps. You've done for yourself, and all because you lacked a scrap of human sympathy to help the man you ruined. Come along,” he

ordered roughly. "There's a couple of cops waiting outside, and I've wasted too much time already."

He gripped the fellow's elbow, and Robinson, limp, shaking, almost in a collapse, went without resistance. The brother followed, but just outside the door he was seen to pause.

"One minute, young man," said a bluff, businesslike voice, which made Pebble's eyes widen. "When you're ready to go to Frisco, come downtown and see me. Here's the address. I've been done a good turn by the exposure of your miserable brother. I came up here this morning to kick him off the team."

Old Bliss Stone entered briskly, followed by Jim Kelley. At the sight of them Jake Beatty's wrath, which had been perilously close to the boiling point all morning, bubbled over. His face turned purple.

"You did, eh?" he snarled. "Who in thunder are you? And what have you got to say about the running of this club?"

"Only the right which goes with the controlling interest of stock ownership," answered old Blister promptly.

Beatty puffed out his fat cheeks, laughing desirively. "A likely thing!" he sneered. "I own

fifty-five per cent. myself. If that ain't the control, I'll eat the certificates."

"It would be rather an expensive meal," old Bliss said grimly. "You may be down on the books for fifty-five per cent. of the shares, but you seem to forget those you pledged six weeks ago and never redeemed. I suppose you thought you didn't have to do that till just before the next directors' meeting. That's where you slipped up. I stepped in, and, with the help of my friend Kelley here—who's going to be chief scout of this outfit, by the way—cleaned up everything you don't personally hold. It's sixty-two per cent. in all. I reckon that gives me a little say-so, don't it?"

Beatty turned livid. "It's an outrage!" he sputtered; "a put-up job! I'll get out an injunction! I'll—" He choked as the full hopelessness of his position seemed to overcome him. "Wh-what d'you want of a ball team, anyhow?" he whined.

"I propose to see my son get an even break and a fair show with other players," retorted Blister. He turned to Pebble. "I guess you'll get your chance now!" He chuckled. "The man who manages my team don't play any favorites. I won't stand for it."

"But you're too late, dad!" cried Pebble in deep dismay. "They've sold me to the White Wings!"

For an instant old Bliss did not seem to comprehend. "Sold you?" he growled. Then the full meaning of it burst upon him. "Sold you!" he roared, his face purpling. "You mean to say I've bought this team—and you're not on it? Who did it?" His eyes ranged around the faces to rest fiercely on Frazer's almost beaming countenance. "Was it you?"

"You're both barking up the wrong tree," the manager informed them promptly. "He hasn't been sold—yet. The White Wings made an offer for him over a week ago, and Mr. Beatty wanted to accept it, but I held the deal up. So you see he's still one of the Wolves."

Stone heard this almost incredulously. Not sold, after all! Still a member of the club! His eyes began to glow, and he laughed. Henceforth, he suddenly felt sure, he was to be one of the recognized human cogs of the great baseball machine.

He was right. And, untrammeled by a meddlesome owner, Manager Frazer drove that machine at conquering speed, eventually winning not only the league pennant but the championship of the

world. How this victory was won and how much it cost one great player, who had mounted to the zenith of a brilliant baseball career, is narrated in "Courtney of the Center Garden," the seventh volume of The Big League Series.

A touch on Pebble's arm brought him around to face Hermia Meredith. Her lids drooped, her cheeks were flushed, her voice was low and embarrassed.

"Please take us out to the taxi," she requested in a whisper.

"Great Scott!—of course," he exclaimed, stricken at his forgetfulness. "I beg your pardon for not thinking of it before."

He escorted her out into the corridor, Mrs. Bertram accompanying them. Their progress to the street was a silent one. He wanted to say something, but it was difficult to find words for a girl who had just experienced such a painful awakening. Miss Meredith was the one to break the spell.

"It's dreadful!" she said suddenly, in a low tone. "Fancy having a friend like that—a forger!"

"Friend!" said Pebble eagerly. "Is that all? Why, I thought you were—engaged!"

She stopped and looked at him in displeased as-

tonishment. "Engaged?" she echoed. "Never! I did like him, but— What made you ever imagine such a thing?"

Pebble flushed, a sudden sparkle in his eyes. "Laura Reid said something—and, besides, he had your photograph in his watch. I knew you never—"

"My photograph in his watch!" Her tone expressed astonishment and indignation. "I never heard of such a thing! He must have stolen it. I missed one a long time ago. No one pays attention to anything Laura Reid says," she added, as a sort of afterthought.

Having helped them into the cab, Pebble set one foot on the step and leaned through the open door.

"And then," he said deliberately, "there was the way you turned me down the last time we met."

A faint smile hovered about Miss Meredith's lips. "Don't you think you deserved it?" she countered composedly. "Did you expect me to be friendly after the manner in which you cut me for a year or more?"

Pebble's face grew radiant. "Say, Hermia, will you be home to-night?" he asked.

For a moment Miss Meredith idly contemplated

a passing dray. The color deepened in her face—to the eyes of Gifford Stone the loveliest face in all the world.

“You might call and see,” she answered almost in a whisper.

THE END





